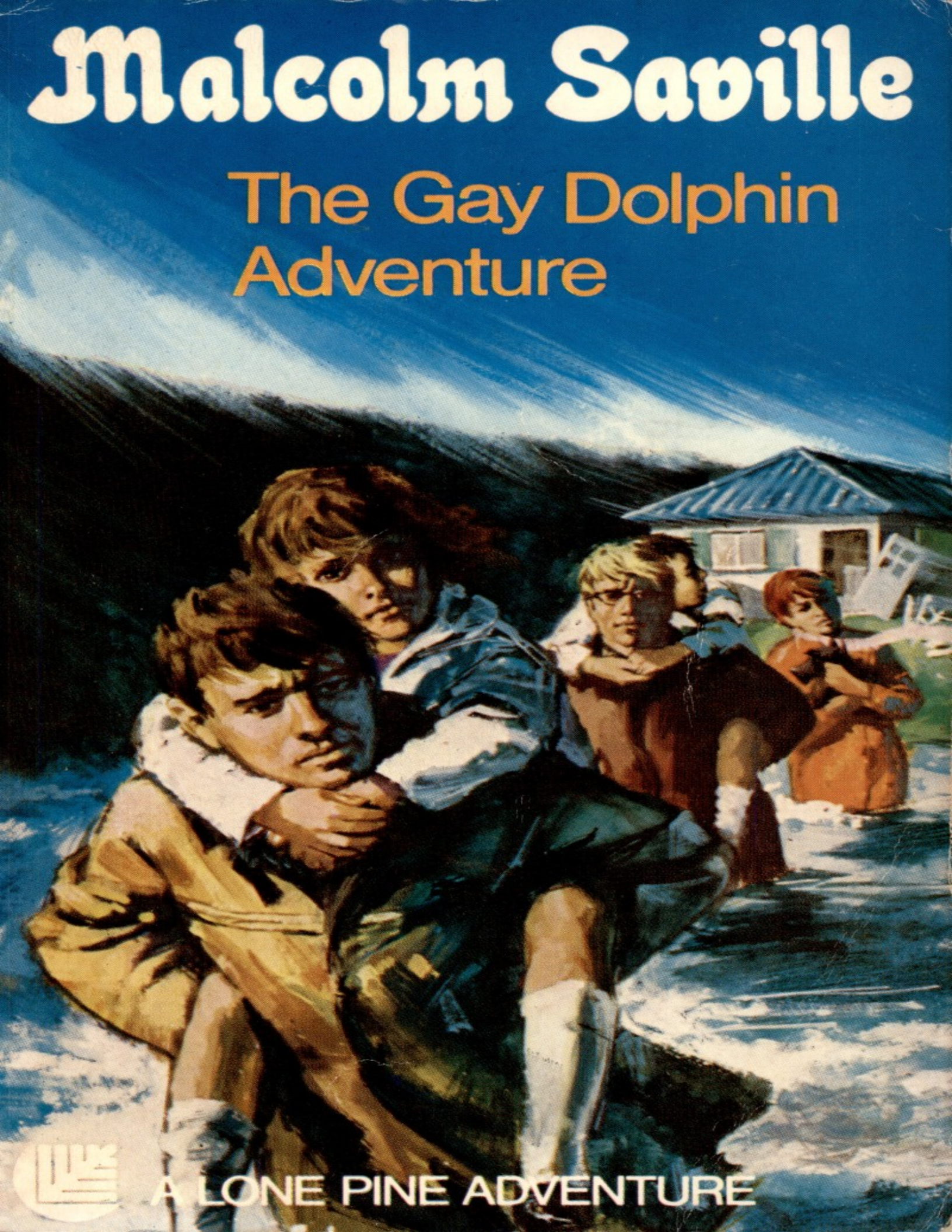
Malcolm Saville

The Gay Dolphin Adventure



A LONE PINE ADVENTURE

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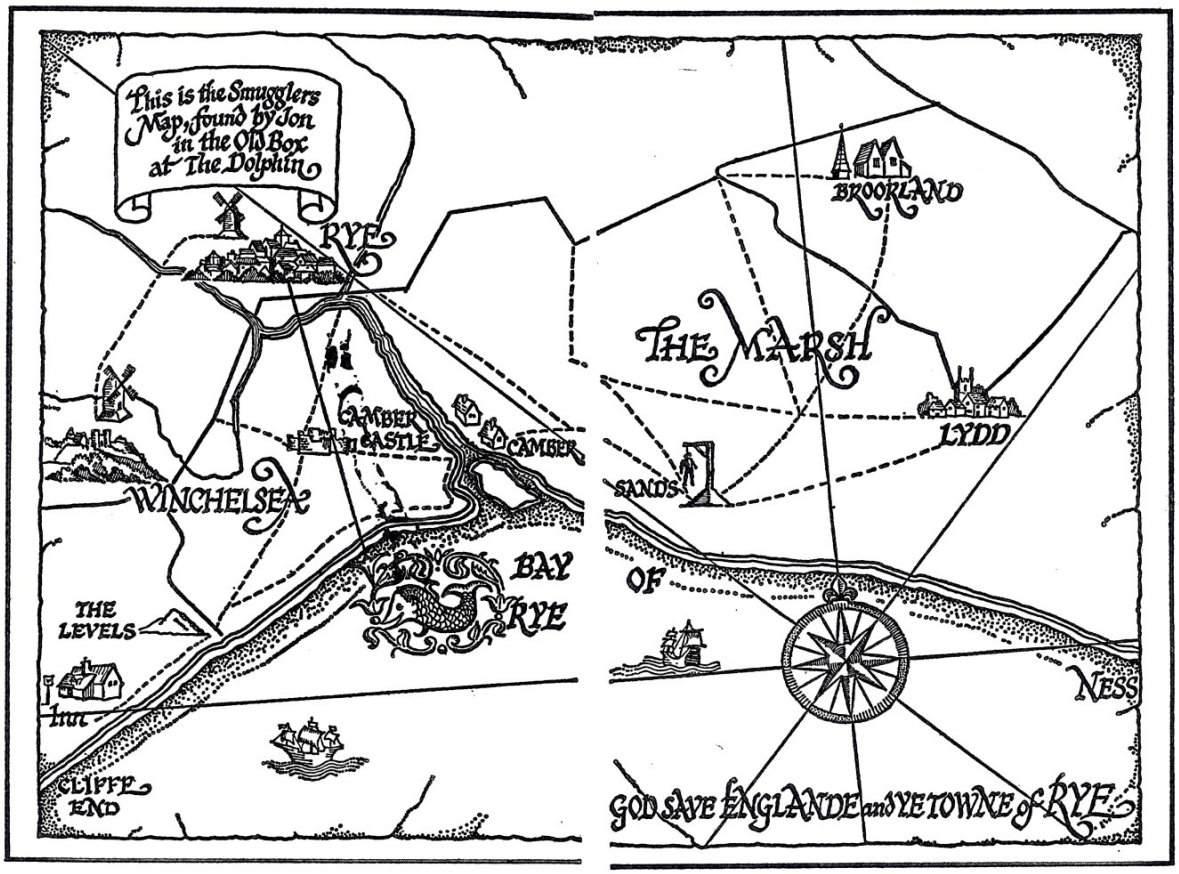
For My Wife


This is the Smugglers Map, found by Jon in the Old Box at The Dolphin
RYE
BROOKLAND
THE MARSH
LYDD
CAMBER CASTLE
CAMBER
WINCHELSEA
SANDS
BAY OF RYE
THE LEVELS
Inn
CLIFFE END
NESS
GOD SAVE ENGLANDE and YE TOWNE of RYE

Foreword

In the western corner of Kent there stretches for some twenty miles in length by three to eight in depth the lonely and mysterious Romney Marsh-land which once was covered by the sea and now is below its level, dotted with sheep and intersected by deep, dark dykes.

On the Kent-Sussex border, at the very edge of the Marsh, the ancient town of Rye clings in a huddle of grey walls and red roofs to a rocky pyramid rising abruptly from the windy levels. You can go to Rye, as Jon and Penny did, to explore for yourself its cobbled streets and narrow winding courts and alleys. You will not find the *Gay Dolphin*, nor Trader's Street, but there is a street from the end of which you can look out over Camber Castle to the sea. And two miles away to the west, on another but very different kind of hill, Rye's forgotten sister port of Winchelsea drowses in the sun and you can go there, too, and perhaps find the old windmill in which Jon hid.

The country in which this story is set is real, but the people are not and have no reference to any living person. Hastings, Rye and Winchelsea are three of the seven Cinque Ports that in the Middle Ages were responsible for the sea defence of England and were the cradle of the British Navy. The other ports are New Romney, Hythe, Dover and Sandwich.

M.S.

1. Friday: Jon and Penny

The morning sunlight, slanting down through the murky roof and through the smoke and steam of Charing Cross Station, settled in silvery pools round the bookstalls and barriers. Sometimes the scurrying passengers were caught in the beams and picked out, as actors are on the stage by the spotlights.

Just by the entrance of the main departure platform a particularly broad beam caught and then held two hatless heads - one red and the other yellow. The red-head was a girl of about fifteen with wide-set grey eyes and a tip-tilted, freckled nose.

Her name was Penelope Warrender, but she was always called Penny. Sometimes Jonathan, her cousin, called her "Newpenny" because of the colour of her hair, and now he was grinning down at her in the superior way which always infuriated her.

"What are you going to do, you idiot?" Penny was storming at him. "It's no use standing there grinning when you've left the tickets behind. And you haven't got enough money to buy any more. You know you haven't, Jon... If you'd got any sense at all you'd go now and ask a policeman or someone to lend you the money."

Her cousin hunched up the knapsack on his back and ran his fingers through his tousled hair. He was four inches taller than Penny and just sixteen. Never, under any circumstances, could Jon look tidy. Always his wrists seemed longer than his sleeves and his trousers too short. His tie, when he remembered to put it on, was often adrift from his collar and his rather heavy glasses inclined to hide the intelligence of his eyes.

"I did not say I'd left the tickets at home," he explained carefully. "I said that I wouldn't much mind if I had because I could spend a very pleasant hour or so here inspecting these engines."

Jon felt in his pocket, produced two green tickets, heaved up his cousin's suitcase and joined the queue passing through the barrier.

"We've absolutely got to get a carriage to ourselves, Jon," she said. "We can't start off an adventure like this with anybody else. When we find an empty one I'll pretend to have whooping cough if you like, and you can keep everyone at bay from the window. That generally works, doesn't it? Or would you rather be the whooper? I don't care really, but I'm pretty good. I did it last term once on the way to a match... Look! Here's an empty one... No, it isn't. That's no good. Two kids and their grandmother just come in from the corridor... Come on, Jon! Do buck up. I can't think why everyone wants to travel today..." and she chatted on while Jon pursued his leisurely way up the platform.

Jon was quite used to her breathless, impetuous ways, for the cousins stayed together in the holidays. Penny's parents were in India, and she had not seen them for some years, and Mrs. Warrender, her aunt, was almost nearer to her than her own mother. And she had worshipped her uncle, who had been killed in the war.

The suitcase was heavy, so Jon put it down for a moment to rest, while Penny dodged round the refreshment trolley and hurried ahead.

Suddenly Penny called:

"Hi, Jon! Buck up! I've got one!" And there she was almost as far as the engine and waving wildly.

There were not many minutes to go now before the train left, and the big engine was hissing gently just under the signals. Jon had his eyes fixed on it and did not notice the porter until he had collided with him. He apologized and then looked in astonishment at the woman whose luggage the porter was carrying. She was the sort of person that deserved a second glance if only because of her extraordinary appearance. She was short and very broad and rather inclined to waddle. A bright orange scarf was most un-becomingly draped round her greyish hair, which was cut short like that of a man. As she turned to speak to the porter, Jon, groping again for the

suitcase which he had dropped, saw that she wore heavy horn-rimmed glasses, with lenses so thick that it was difficult to see her eyes.

"Come along, my man," she was saying. "Never mind that star-gazing lad. He should look where he's going. You hurry on and get me a corner... And don't drop those bags..." and she turned her enormous back on Jon and waddled after the porter.

Jon, still fascinated by the crude check design of the strange woman's costume, was slow to follow until he realized that Penny, hopping first on one leg and then on the other and grimacing horribly, was urging him to greater speed as the porter approached the compartment she was guarding. Jon saw the danger and spurted, but he was still ten yards away when Penny jumped in and slammed the door. The porter reached the compartment, looked in, put down the bags and was just about to open the door when Penny let the window down, put out her head and was seized with an awful fit of coughing. The porter was almost blown backwards by the blast, but he rallied and put his hand to the door again.

Penny, now scarlet in the face, shook her head at him, but before she could speak the large woman arrived, with Jon only just behind her.

"Come along! Come along!" she boomed. "Open the door, man! Open the door. This will do as well as anything else, I suppose... What's the matter with you, child? Let me in, please."

Penny gasped piteously and fought for breath.

"Oh, Jon, dear... There you are at last... Tell the lady, Jon... I think we ought to tell her..."

"Nah then, missy," said the porter, opening the door, "you go an' corf in the corridor and let me get the lidy's baggage in."

Penny moved reluctantly aside, glaring fiercely at Jon as she did so. The porter put four suitcases on the rack, while the woman fumbled in a great black bag and presented him with a tip. Then she heaved herself into the carriage and flopped down in the seat opposite Penny.

"And what is it that you ought to tell me, my dear?" she asked as her bag slid off her lap to the floor.

Penny picked it up for her and, to Jon's admiration, gazed at the woman with wide, innocent eyes.

"Well," she said, "I've *had* whooping cough, and we thought..."

"Oh, we did, did we? I've had it too, my dear, so you needn't worry... Now, my boy, come in if you're coming, and don't fiddle about there in the doorway."

Jon flushed with annoyance and squeezing past the big woman's knees he dumped his knapsack on the rack in the far corner.

"Coming over here, Jon?" Penny asked hopefully.

"No, thanks," he said tersely. "I shall be busy on this side for a bit, and I want you to stay over there and write down the numbers of any engines you see. Got the pencil I gave you? And the paper?"

Penny looked out of the window. The train was gliding swiftly now above the squalid rooftops of the South London slums, which for a minute were hidden by a green electric train overtaking them. She fumbled in the pocket of her blazer for a pencil and looked up to catch the large woman's eye. She was not sure, but she thought the stranger winked at her. It was difficult to be certain because her glasses were so thick, but just then a big engine hurtled by on her side and Jon called, "Did you get her, Penny?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Jon, but I didn't quite..." she began when the strange woman surprisingly interrupted and called out the number of the engine.

"And here's a pencil, my dear. I always have stacks of pencils" - and she dived into the untidy black bag and produced a handful.

Jon turned from the other window in amazement. "I say," he said, "thanks awfully. That was jolly quick of you. Are you keen on engines?"

"Not a bit," was the answer. "But I'm quick to see things," and there was quite a friendly note in her voice as she smiled at them both.

When the train had left the edge of London behind and was roaring through the suburbs, she asked Jon to get one of her cases from the rack and then produced some chocolate.

"Share it between you," she said. After this it was difficult for them not to be friendly when she spoke to them, and Jon was trying to guess what she was and where she was going when she gave herself away by looking suddenly at Penny and saying abruptly:

"I'd like to sketch you, my child. Can you stay still for a few minutes like that? Look out of the window."

Penny flushed as the woman groped in the bag again and brought out one of the pencils and an old envelope and began to draw with quick, firm strokes.

Jon crossed to her side and saw Penny coming to life on a scrap of paper.

"Why, you're an artist!" he blurted out in admiration, and the woman laughed.

"I always enjoy being told so," she said, giving the envelope to him. "Perhaps you would like to keep this of your sister? If you don't want it, I dare say someone else will one day... But is she your sister? You're not much alike."

"No. We're cousins, but Penny's people are in India, so she lives with us in the holidays... What do you think of yourself, Penny? Funny little thing, aren't you?"

"Ballinger is my name," the woman put in. "And, of course you can have that. Send it to your parents and tell them I'd like to paint you one day."

It was just when the train ran through Tonbridge that Miss Ballinger looked up from her paper and said, "Are you off to Hastings for your summer holiday? Late to start in September, isn't it?"

"We're not really going on a holiday at all, Miss Ballinger. This is all rather an adventure for us, though I expect Jon is too grown-up to admit it. You see, we're going to our new home and we've never even seen it before. Everyone I've told about it says that Rye is wonderful. Do you know it...?"

"Know it?" she said. "Of course I know it. And Winchelsea, too. I've got a little place down on Winchelsea beach. You'd both better come over and see me one day. How long are you staying in Rye?"

"We go back to school on the twenty-second," Jon said. "But we'll have a fortnight. I wonder if you know the *Gay Dolphin*? It's a little hotel in Trader's Street, and that's where we're going to live. "My mother's been down there for three weeks getting the place ready, and now we're going down to help a bit before she opens properly," Jon continued. "You see, it wasn't very easy for her with Penny and me at school when Dad was killed, and then an old uncle of Mother's who had lived in Rye all his life died. He owned the *Gay Dolphin* and he left it to her."

"I've stayed there before now," Miss Ballinger nodded. "I know it well. I've sketched it many a time from Trader's Street. Well, young man, if your mother wants guests, I'll come. I remember that the place was not very well run. When does she re-open? Do you know?"

Jon produced his wallet and took a neatly-folded letter from it. Before he spoke again Penny looked out of the window. They had passed Tunbridge Wells now and were rushing through the lovely Sussex Weald.

Jon was talking again.

"I've got a long letter from Mother here. Perhaps you'd like to hear what she says about it all?"

Miss Ballinger nodded. "Indeed, I would. I love Rye, and I know you'll love the *Dolphin* as much as I do."

Jon smiled and went on. "There's nothing about the place on the first page except that she says she has kept on the manager, which is a big help; but of course we shall have to help her to make a real success of it. I believe

Americans come to Rye a lot and we hope some will stay at the *Gay Dolphin*. And will you tell your friends about it, too, Miss Ballinger? It's decent of you to say you'll come, but what about your cottage? You won't want to stay with us if you've got somewhere else to live, will you?"

"Oh, yes, I will. My bungalow - it's not a cottage - was the only place in Winchelsea I could get and, as I told you, I like the *Dolphin*, and I'll like it better still if it's got a new owner... Does your mother say when she's going to open? But you can ask her to put my name down, anyhow. Read me what she says about Rye, for I say it's a magic little town that casts a spell over everyone who comes in under the old gateways and climbs its cobbled streets."

Penny looked up in surprise. Miss Ballinger's voice changed as she spoke the last words quite softly.

"Yes," replied Jon. "Mother says that, too. She says we'll never want to go away again, for Rye is like home at once... Here it is... She tells us about Winchelsea, too. 'I can hardly believe that two such places as these ancient ports really exist,' she says, 'and because I want you both to see them for the first time in the best way I want you to come to Hastings, and Vasson, my nice porter, will bring the old car over to meet you there... Our *Gay Dolphin* is great fun, and I know you'll both love it! Your rooms are ready, and Jon's is in the front with a little window looking two ways - one out into the street in front and the other down the street, right over the very edge of the town across the flat marsh to the sea.' What does she mean by the marsh, Miss Ballinger?" he added as he turned the page.

"It's the flat land reclaimed from the sea that stretches from Rye on its hill to the sand dunes. I'll tell you more about it presently if there's time, but we're getting on fast now. It's really the western edge of Romney Marsh... I'd like to hear what else your mother says."

He went on: "This is the bit I was looking for, Miss Ballinger. Here it is. She says... 'I'm sure there are secret passages and ghosts here, and one of the maids told me that this was one of the inns used by the Marsh smugglers in olden days. She said that the window in Jon's room was built to jutt out over the street so that a lantern placed there could be seen away down at the

little harbour at the mouth of the muddy river two miles away, where the boats would be waiting with contraband from France, to be exchanged for wool from the Marsh sheep. This is a strange old house, but I know that I can make it really lovely, although Uncle Charles certainly left it in a muddle. And this reminds me that the old man has left me a lot of ancient documents and letters that look as if they won't be de-ciphered until Jon has had the wit to translate them. So you can see that there'll be plenty for you both to do, with secret papers and new places to explore.' "

He looked up from the page.

"Do you think she's right, Miss Ballinger? It sounds great, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does. I should like to see those old documents she mentions. I'm interested in things like that... Does she say when she'll be ready for visitors?"

Jon skipped the last pages.

"No, she doesn't say that. There's a bit here about the new manager. She doesn't say a lot really about him, but I don't think she likes him... But we shall soon know for ourselves."

Another station flashed backwards as he spoke.

The long train was swinging round a steep curve and away to the right they could see the greenish-blue of the sea and the yellow line of the shingle beach. They had hardly got their luggage down before the train stopped at the first of the St. Leonards' stations. Then, after two more tunnels, with another station in between, came Hastings. Jon reached up for Miss Ballinger's cases.

"Don't you bother, my lad. I'll get a porter to do that. Good-bye to you both, for the present. No, don't wait for me... Be off with you... Good-bye..."

Jon looked at her in some surprise for she seemed suddenly in a great hurry to be rid of them.

"Well, thank you for telling us all about Rye," Penny said impetuously. "Perhaps we'll see you again some time."

"Maybe you will. Good-bye! Good-bye!"

Jon got out without paying much attention to his cousin. His mind seemed to be on other things, and when Penny had struggled out with her own case she saw him working his way up the platform against the crowds making for the bridge behind her. Penny was not the kind of girl who liked to be overlooked, so she dumped her case down outside the Refreshment Room and stalked after him up the platform.

He was talking to the engine driver, of course, and if she had not known better she might have thought that they were old friends.

Jon looked round.

"Hello," he said vaguely. "Where have you been?"

Penny looked at him with pity.

"And just suppose that man with the car has gone while you've been gossiping with engine drivers. I don't see how he would know that that's the sort of thing you do when you get to a place where you're being met! He'd have to be jolly clever to know that, wouldn't he? I bet he's gone home and told Auntie we're not on the train... That's my case by the door marked Buffet. Do you mind carrying it for me because I'm tired out waiting for you?"

Jon picked it up without another word. He was still looking a little embarrassed!

They toiled up the steps and were crossing the bridge before he spoke again.

"Funny old thing, wasn't she? What did you think of her, Penny?"

"I tell you what *was* peculiar, Jon, and that was the way she tried to get rid of us when we got here. She was friendly enough nearly all the way, but

didn't seem to want us to come out of the station with her... Oh, well! Why worry? Here we are, and I hope the car is waiting."

But it was not. There were only three cars waiting in the sun-drenched station yard and they were obviously taxis.

"What did I tell you, Jon? He's gone. He couldn't wait. He didn't know about you and engine drivers. What a pity!"

"All right. You said all that before several times. You go and ask any of those chaps if they're Fred Vasson and I'll go and telephone Mother and see if he's left."

"The great brain at work," she said, as she sauntered over to the waiting taxis. She asked the two older drivers if they were Fred Vasson and they shook their heads. Penny went back to find Jon. He was waiting for her at the door of a telephone kiosk.

Penny squeezed into the box with him and shut the door. Jon got out his mother's letter again to find the number. Just as Mrs. Warrender answered the telephone, Jon felt Penny nudge him violently in the back and hissed, "Jon, Jon! Look quickly!" but there was not room for him to turn and he had to strain to hear his mother's voice.

"-Sensible of you to 'phone, darlings," she was saying. "You are at Hastings station, are you?... Fred's on his way now, but the car wouldn't start. He should be there in ten minutes... Are you both all right?... Longing to see you, Jon... My love to Penny. 'Bye."

Before he could replace the receiver, Penny forced the door open and dragged him outside.

"Did you see her?" she gasped. "Quick, Jon! I want to know where they're going."

"Who do you mean?" Jon protested. "What's all the excitement?"

"Miss Ballinger, you idiot! She came out of the Refreshment place there with such a peculiar-looking man. There they are! Look! They're getting a taxi."

Jon was just in time to see their travelling companion's broad back filling the taxi door and a small, slight man with a black hat getting in after her.

"The thing which was peculiar about her was the man with her. He wore a most sinister black hat - the sort of hat that nobody who isn't sinister wears. He had very black sloping eyebrows, if you know what I mean, and a very small sloping black moustache thing on his lip... I tell you what I think he is, Jon... I think he's in a band somewhere and I don't think he's English either... I tell you another thing, Jon. I think that if he hadn't been carrying her bags he'd have been waving his arms about. That's the sort of man he was," she finished triumphantly.

"I don't see that it matters," Jon persisted. "How did she act, anyway?"

Penny looked puzzled. "Come to think of it," she said, "she seemed different. I can't quite explain... Anyway, what does Auntie say and where's the car?"

"Just coming," Jon said. "Here! Lean against this wall. It's beautifully hot."

So they leaned against the station wall in the sunshine. Faintly, there came to them the smell of hot tar and oil and, fainter still, the smell of the sea.

"Funny," said Jon after a little, "but seaside towns always smell different, don't they? I like it."

"I like smells, too," Penny agreed. "And here comes a green car and it looks old enough to be ours... I say, Jon, if that's Fred Vasson, I like him."

The car swept round the station approach and pulled up opposite them.

"You'll be Master Jonathan and Miss Penelope?" asked the driver, in a slow drawl, as he got out. His eyes were very blue and, as he touched his old felt hat, they noticed that his hair was fair. It was difficult to judge his age

because his brown face was a mass of wrinkles which ran all together as he smiled.

"You'll have been worried maybe," he went on, "and I'm right sorry I be late, but start she wouldn't, and I'm not much of a hand at the engines. But we be all right now, and I'll soon have you home.

Fred showed them the ruins of the ancient castle on the cliff top; then they crawled up the narrow street of the old fishing village which snuggled between two hills, with railed pavements as high as the roof of the car.

"Reckon tides 'ud cum right up street in old days," Fred explained. "Sometimes now when wind's south-west and tides are high we get trouble round these parts."

The car climbed fast now up through streets of drab houses and then turned east into a broad, tree-shaded road. On their right now and far below them was the sea. It was a lovely road and autumn was already touching with a tender hand the woods through which they rushed. Soon they passed near a church with a high square tower standing alone on the gorse-crowned down.

"Fairlight," Fred said. "And 'tis a landmark they say for all sailors beating up the Channel. But if it's churches you fancy, you'll be seeing something better afore long."

Even Penny was quiet when they came at last to Winchelsea and Fred drove slowly down the wide street that skirted the churchyard and the ruin of the once mighty church.

"Miss Ballinger said that once the sea came right up to the walls of Winchelsea, didn't she? I can't see where," said Jon. "This place might be anywhere for it doesn't look as if it had ever been a port and I can't even see the sea."

Fred stopped, jumped out and opened the door.

"I was to stop here and take you to the look-out, Mrs. Warrender said."

Penny clutched Jon's arm.

"Why, Jon!" she whispered. "It's like she said. I can see what she means and what Auntie meant, too, when she said it was magic. This funny little town, all forgotten and deserted by the sea... Look how flat it is down there. And look at the sheep everywhere."

Jon nodded.

"Yes, you can imagine the sea coming right to the bottom of the cliff." He turned to Fred. "What keeps the sea back now? I suppose those roofs over there are on the beach, but it is all so flat that it looks as if the sea could easily come rolling over again."

"So it could," he said, "and it's been near it more'n once. I mind a time when I was but a lad when the bank broke over yonder..."

"What bank?" Penny interrupted.

The man pointed to the right.

"Those cliffs you see way up yonder are called Cliff End, and right there these flat marshes begin. Pett Level 'tis called here. The great bank of shingle to keep the sea back starts at Cliff End and runs right along to the mouth of the river below Rye yonder."

Jon and Penny followed his moving finger.

"Them liddle houses and shacks and the like," he went on, "they be called Winchelsea Beach, and folks come there in hundreds in summer. Houses be put up behind t' bank, o' course."

"What's that bit of yellow land sticking out into the sea like a finger?" asked Penny, looking further east.

"The Ness," Vasson answered. "Dungeness. Look hard and see if you can spot the lighthouse at the end. Tis black and white."

Jon could not see it even after he had polished his glasses, but Penny picked it out after much eye-straining. Next Fred showed them a squat little ruin with a round keep standing forlorn in the middle of the marsh; this, he told them, was the remains of another castle called Camber. And last he showed them Rye itself, standing compact on its pyramid of rock, with the westering sun glowing on its huddled roofs. A river wound round the base of the little town and made its way to the sea.

"Now you can see why these two towns were important ports," Jon said. "When the sea came up to them they would be like forts on islands. Just how far did the sea come, I wonder?"

Fred lifted his hand again and pointed.

"There's the old cliff," he said. "Runs right along there from back o' Rye to back o' Winchelsea here. There's a way to walk under old cliffs all the way"

"Come on," Penny said. "Let's go. I want to get inside Rye and see what it's like. I want to get home."

They drove slowly under the old gateway.

"Strand Gate 'tis called," Fred told them, and "Of course it is," said Penny. "It couldn't be anything else. It faces the strand."

At the bottom of the hill they turned off the road that led to the beach, crossed a canal and tore along a wide road as straight as a ruler. Just as it seemed that they were coming close to the ruin of Camber the road swung away, and Rye was before them and getting bigger every minute. They crossed the muddy-banked tidal river and just had time to see the black, tarred drying sheds in which the fishermen hang their nets, and a few boats drawn up out of the water, before finding themselves in the heart of the town.

The streets were narrow, and some that led steeply upwards were cobbled, with houses leaning precariously over the pavements. Neither Jon nor Penny had ever seen a little town like this before. Fred was concentrating on his driving and did not even attempt to answer their questions as he

twisted and turned and finally crawled up a street which led to the great church which they had seen crowning Rye from the Winchelsea look-out.

Then, "Nearly home now," he grunted, and turning two more sharp corners pulled up suddenly at the end of a wider street in which grass tinged the cobble stones.

"Maybe you'd like to walk home from here," he grinned. "There she is! Swinging up for you in the sunshine," and he pointed ahead to the end of the road.

Down below in the streets of the town all had been noise and bustle, but here Jon and Penny were in a strange world. The houses on each side were crowded together, but were all different - little white houses with black doors were squeezed between bigger houses whose fronts were crisscrossed with beams.

"Oh, Jon!" Penny whispered, "I believe that's it. That's the *Dolphin*, I'm sure."

Jon smiled down at her.

"Look, Penny. This street is rather like that in Winchelsea. It seems to stop at the end, and as we are on the top of a hill I expect there's a cliff there, too. We should be able to see the marshes and the sea when we get there."

"Now look at the wicked old Dolphin," Penny interrupted. "Look at the look in his eye, Jon. No wonder they call him gay."

While they were looking up at the sign Mrs. Warrender came out to greet them. When she had disengaged herself from Penny and given Jon a hug she slipped an arm through each of theirs and led them a few steps to the end of the street, which was guarded by an old wall.

"Look at this first," she said, "and then you can explore the *Dolphin* later. Did Fred tell you something about Rye and Winchelsea as you came along?... He doesn't talk very much, but he's a splendid person and a great help to me. I think you'll like him... There! Look! Here we are at the very

edge of the cliff, and from Jon's window, as I think I said, you can look out to sea. Across the river and away to the east is Romney Marsh, and to the right a little behind us is Winchelsea on her hill."

As Jon had said, it was like Winchelsea in a way, for both towns stood on their rocky hills and faced the sea which had long since deserted them. But here the cliff face was rocky and glowed with colour.

Penny leaned over the wall and grabbed a cluster of tiny pink flowerets waving among the delicate green, feathery leaves of a bush.

"It's tamarisk," Mrs. Warrender explained. "I believe you see it only at seaside places. I love it."

"There's a way down here," Jon said, pointing to some shallow steps that led down by the side of the houses on their right.

"It's called Trader's Passage - after the Freetraders or smugglers, I expect - and you can get down to the road and river that way, but it's hard work coming up... Now let's go in and you can see your rooms and explore before we have some tea..."

They turned out of the sunshine into the shadow of the archway. On the left was a door marked "Hotel Only", and opposite another door, newly painted white, with "Private" on it.

"This is us," said Mrs. Warrender, pushing open the latter. "Not all our rooms are this side - you see, the two parts of the building are joined by this bridge over our heads - but you must always use this door and keep out of the way of the guests. We open on Monday, but I did want you down here first, and we're practically ready now, thanks to Fred and, I suppose, to Mr. Grandon."

"Who's Mr. Grandon?" asked Jon as they stepped into a dark little hall.

"Oh, he's the manager. I'll tell you about him later. He's out now... Come and see your rooms."

Penny soon lost count of the corners they turned, the corridors they walked and the stairs they went up and down before they reached Jon's room. He didn't say much when he saw it. Just "Thank you, Mum. It's great!" But they both knew how thrilled he was.

The window, as Mrs. Warrender had tried to explain in her letter, jutted over the pavement so that it was possible to see up the street, over the edge of the cliff to the mouth of the river and the sea and right out over the grassy levels across the Marsh.

There were shelves round the walls for his books, which had yet to be unpacked from the two heavy corded boxes at the foot of the bed, a dressing-table with lots of drawers and a small desk in the window.

"I think, if you don't mind," he said, "I'll move things round a bit and put the bed right in the window. I'd like to sleep there so that if I lift my head at night I'll be able to see the lighthouse flashing."

"Arrange it as you like, Jon," his mother said. "I knew you'd have your own ideas... Now come and see Penny's rabbit hutch."

So they all squeezed along another narrow passage and up a short but narrow twisty staircase.

"You're in a different part of the house now, but I was so sure Penny would like this little room that I had to keep it for her. Here we are! Mind your head, Jon. The doorway is low."

Penny gasped with excitement. It was certainly a tiny room, but it was gay with chintz, and there were flowers on the window-ledge by the fluttering curtains and on the little dressing-table with its dainty frill. And on the bedspread by the pillow was the sad-looking and now very thin white teddy bear, who had gone to bed regularly with Penny until not so very long ago. Suddenly her eyes filled with tears and she dared not trust herself to speak. They were so decent to her! They were such darlings! Only Auntie and Jon understood what it was like to have a real mother and father so far away that, except for snaps and letters, they were not real at all. And now this lovely little room!

Just for a few seconds Penny felt much older than she really was and she pushed rudely past Jon, who was in her way, and put her head out of the window so that they should not see how she was feeling. After a little the mist cleared from her eyes and she saw that she was looking down into the little walled garden, and on the other side of the wall were the shallow steps of Trader's Passage. At the bottom of the garden, which sloped down the hill, was the side of another house and on the right another wall, which she guessed correctly divided the garden from the yard with its big garage.

"What a sweet little garden," she said as she felt Mrs. Warrender's hand on her shoulder. "But nothing much grows in it, does it?"

"I've had roses, Penny, and some of them are here on your dressing-table, and those are gillyflowers growing in the wall."

"Is that old tree growing *through* the wall, Auntie? I suppose it was big when they built the wall and the people who lived here wouldn't have it cut down as its roots were here, so they had to build round it."

Jon leaned over her other shoulder.

"I've seen one or two like that before," he said. "That's a withy tree - a sort of willow."

Mrs. Warrender said:

"You can come up and unpack after tea. Your trunks arrived safely, you see, and you'll have plenty to do getting tidy. Now we'll have tea in the lounge and you can see whether you like it, and what the hotel part of the house is like."

They went downstairs again, and Fred, now very smart in a dark-green uniform, brought them tea and toast as they sat round a smouldering but sweet-smelling log-fire.

"We never lets 'un out, miss," he smiled as he saw Penny's inquiring glance. "In winter we bank it up the chimney, but now we just about keep 'un going with oak logs. There's always fire on this hearth."

The large chairs were very soft and comfortable, and Penny was tired after the journey and all the excitement of their home-coming. She heard Jon telling his mother something about last term and then must have dozed a little until she heard her name.

"Penny, darling," Mrs. Warrender was saying, "I was telling Jon that I've got another surprise for you tomorrow, but I may want your help, too, in getting everything ready for Monday. And that reminds me to tell you both about Mr. Grandon. I want you to remember that he is my manager and that he is really running the *Dolphin* for me. I want you to be polite to him - and none of your amusing little games with him, please, Penny! But there's no need to have anything much to do with him. Remember that he has got his work to do and that our side of the house is nothing to do with him."

Jon remarked:

"Don't you like him, Mother? You don't sound as if you do. Why are you telling us to be so careful about him?"

Mrs. Warrender laughed.

"I don't know. I suppose that I don't really like him and yet he's very efficient. I don't think he's English somehow, but old Uncle Charles must have thought a lot of him because he left a letter with him for me which recommended him very strongly... Anyway, whether we like him or not, I can't do without him. You see, running a place like this is not just a game, and when the first guests come it will be very different for us all."

"Well, let's see this Mr. Grandon, anyway," said Jon. "Can't you ring for him or something?"

His mother looked shocked.

"Of course I can't," she said. "I wouldn't dare. Anyway, he's out and won't be back until late tonight... What would you like to do now? Go and unpack and then meet for supper at eight in our own sitting-room?"

Jon got up and stretched.

"What about all those papers, Mother - the papers that your old Uncle Charles left and that you said I could go through?"

"Oh, yes! Those are part of my surprise, but we'll look at them tomorrow."

So Jon went upstairs to unpack his books and move his furniture round. Penny, who always postponed action of that kind if she could, wandered out into the street again.

The shadows were lengthening now as she leaned against the low wall and looked down over the gently swaying tamarisks to the road and river below. The tide was running out and she could see a few seagulls wheeling above some rubbish on the muddy banks and some blue-jerseyed fishermen, looking rather like toy models, leaning against the rails of the bridge. Up here she was above the world, and as she gazed first out over the darkening marsh and then up their little cobbled street past the wicked-looking *Dolphin*, she could almost imagine that she was living in a different time.

At supper Penny was her usual cheerful self, but she was ready for bed when her aunt suggested it.

Upstairs in her little room she felt too sleepy to do anything much about tidying up, although Mrs. Warrender had looked rather disapprovingly at the muddle when she came to say good night.

After she had turned out the light, Penny drew back the flowered curtains and pushed the window open wider. She shivered as a gust of salty wind from the marshes and the sea shook the leaves of the withy tree in the garden below, and then she jumped into bed.

She seemed to go to sleep at once, and it was odd that she should wake so suddenly. She switched on the bedside light and saw that she had only been asleep for two hours. She sat up in surprise. Everything was quiet. No board creaked. The wind had not risen, and only by straining her ears could she catch the faint and drowsy murmur of the sea. Then she remembered! With all the excitement today she had forgotten to write in her diary. Penny had to put up with a lot of teasing both at home and at school about her diary, but a daily entry was one of the few rules she set herself.

She remembered now that she had not risked packing her diary, but had put it in her shoulder bag in which their sandwiches and a few other treasures had been carried.

But what had she done with it?

In her aunt's sitting-room, of course! She remembered now slipping it off and dropping it on the floor behind the chair. It was a nuisance, but she would have to go and get it because she knew she would not sleep again now until she had written something about this wonderful and exciting day.

She wished she had a torch or could find a switch on the wall. The hotel seemed empty and was very quiet, and she felt her heart thudding as she wondered how she was going to find her way back to her room. Then she had an awful feeling that she was going in the wrong direction, turned back and came at last to her own little staircase again. At least she hoped it was her staircase. She had just decided to leave the diary until the morning when she distinctly heard a sound somewhere below her.

Her heart thumped louder than ever and she felt the palms of her hands grow damp. The sound came again! A sort of quiet hiss or whir. Then she realized it was the sound of a telephone dial, and at the same time she noticed the faint colour of reflected light at the end of the corridor. She crept along with her hands on the wall, turned sharp left, nearly stumbled over a low step and found herself on a landing looking down another staircase into the lounge.

In the far corner, by a shaded light, was the figure of a strange man, with his back to her, busy at the telephone.

He was speaking now with his hand half over the mouthpiece, but he was forced to raise his voice, and Penny came down three steps as she heard him say:

"... Yes, yes. The children have arrived, but never fear... It is no matter... Yes, I will find the papers, and if I cannot bring them to you I will copy those that will give us a clue... Sunday I will meet you... Yes. The old mill at six and I will bring the papers if I can..."

Then Penny shifted her weight and the stair creaked. The man whipped round and she put her hand to her mouth as she recognized him.

It was the man with the little black moustache whom she had seen with Miss Ballinger at Hastings station.

2. Saturday: Mr. Grandon

Penny awoke from a bad dream to hear a weird gurgling. Then she realized that it was pouring with rain and that the gutters round the corners and gables of the house were gushing and singing. The curtains were parted, and from her pillow she could see a grey, dull sky through the open window and raindrops splashing on the corner of her dressing-table.

She jumped out of bed and closed the window. Her watch said half-past six, so she got back to bed and snuggled down for another sleep. But now she was very wide awake, and as she put her arms behind her red head and gazed gravely at the ceiling the adventure of the night came back to her.

She recalled every word spoken by the man at the telephone - the man who must surely be Mr. Grandon, her aunt's manager! The man who knew Miss Ballinger. The man who was to meet somebody at the old mill on Sunday at six and was sure that he could find the papers and had told some other mysterious person that they, "the children", had arrived.

She remembered how the stair had creaked; how she had fled back into the sheltering darkness as he had turned to look at her; how she had wished that Jon had been with her as she blundered round the corners of the long corridor and, more by luck than anything else, had found her own little staircase and the welcome light that shone like a beacon from her open door.

She remembered, too, how she had scrambled into bed with a fast-thumping heart and how, though she had strained her ears, there had been no other sound but the sighing of the wind in the rooftops.

She stretched luxuriously and wiggled her toes. How mad Jon would be when she told him what he had missed! She could tell him at breakfast. But on second thoughts why not tell him now? She slipped into a jersey and jeans and crept into the passage and down the little staircase. It was light enough now for her to see where she was going, and although she remembered the way down the big staircase to the lounge she realized that

she had no idea of how to find Jon's room or her aunt's sitting-room either. She tried two more staircases, but wherever she went she was confronted by closed, silent doors, and somehow she had not the courage to start opening them and looking into rooms which ought to be empty but perhaps were not!

While she was still wondering what was the best thing to do she heard someone whistling softly downstairs, so she ran to the top of the big staircase and looked down into the lounge. Fred Vasson, in a green baize apron, was just plugging in a big electric cleaner and turned with a start when she called softly:

"Good morning, Mr. Vasson. How are you this morning?"

"Good morning, miss. You be up early on a wet morning. Maybe you couldn't sleep well in a strange bed?"

She sat on the edge of one of the big chairs and swung her legs, and it was while Fred was telling her how the sign of the *Gay Dolphin* outside had just been painted by an artist who lived farther up the street that she had her bright idea and realized how she might be able to wake Jon.

"I say, Mr. Vasson, do you think you could lend me a mac? Any old mac would do. You see, I haven't had time to unpack yet and I want to go out for a bit."

"But it's pouring down, miss! And it's early, too, and there won't be anything to see in this weather."

"Just any old mac would do, Mr. Vasson. Just to save me going upstairs again. I love rain. I've always loved the rain."

He looked doubtfully at her shoes and then went over to a cupboard under the stairs.

"Some gent must a' left this some time," he said as he produced a grubby-looking raincoat. "It'll be a bit on the roomy side for you, but it'll keep the rain out for a liddle," and he opened the door for her.

For a moment she stood in the shelter of the arch looking at the rain and then ran out into the street. Jon's window was just above her and, as she had hoped, the narrow pane which faced out to sea was open. She looked round for something to throw in, but the rain water was rushing down the gutters and there were big puddles over the cobblestones and not a pebble or handful of gravel anywhere.

Rather disconsolately, she wandered over to the wall and looked down to the river. The rain was slanting fiercely in from the south-west, and the sea and Winchelsea on its hill were hidden. Then she noticed the weeds growing at the foot of the wall. Pulling up a big wet handful, she shook the rain from her curls and quite unnecessarily tip-toed over to the still-open window and glanced up the street. There was no one in sight so, putting the tip of her tongue between her teeth as she always did when concentrating, she leaned back and tossed up the clod. Even as the wet earth sailed through the air she remembered with glee that Jon had said that he was going to move his bed under the window.

For a long, long moment there was a silence and then came a sort of splosh, followed by a strangled cry. Again there was a silence until Penny, unable to bear the suspense any longer, giggled, and this brought her cousin's face to the window.

At the sight of him the giggle changed to a laugh. He was struggling to put on his spectacles and one side of his face was covered in mud, which was running down into his mouth. He wiped the mud off with his pyjama sleeve and, when his glasses were safely on his nose, spluttered:

"Oh, it was you, was it? I might have known if I'd had time to think. Why don't you go in and keep dry or p'raps you haven't noticed it's raining. Next thing will be that you'll catch cold and spoil our holidays."

"Be quiet, you idiot," she hissed. "Buck up and come down. I've got something vital and urgent and secret to tell you and I didn't know where your room was. Get up, Jon. It's urgent! Really it is!"

"Oh, go back to bed yourself," he growled. "It's too dark and too wet and too early to get up, and I'm going to sleep again. Don't be such an ass,

Penny."

"*Please,* Jon," she pleaded. "I really meant it. I've had an adventure in the night and I want you to know all about it, but you must be quick and I must see you secretly... Jon! Are you listening? Listen! Get up right away and then, when you're ready, open your door and leave it open and listen for me. I can't find anybody or anything in this house because all the doors are always shut. Will you, Jon? Please do," and without realizing it she had put her head on one side and smiled up at him so good-humouredly that he nodded and shut the window.

She wandered back into the yard and saw Fred disappearing through a narrow door just past the hotel entrance. She followed him into a dark little room with a long table under the window.

"Do you live here, Mr. Vasson?" she asked as she slipped her shoulders out of the dripping mac.

He smiled his slow, friendly smile. "I work here sometimes. Odd jobs come to me!... Have you been far? You're not too wet I hope?"

Penny shook her head, but did not satisfy his curiosity.

Soon she slipped out and went into the hotel. There was nobody about, and as Jon should have had time to have washed himself by now, she crossed the lounge and started up the polished stairs. When she was halfway up she turned back and realised that her shoes were so wet that they were dirtying the wood that Fred had probably just been polishing. Better to carry her shoes! She sat down on the stairs with a sigh and had just got one off when a soft voice from above her said:

"Good morning, young lady. You, I think, must be Miss Penny? It would seem that since your arrival you spend most of your time on the stairs... Very singular, Miss Penny! Very odd!"

Penny was so surprised that she jumped up, slightly abashed for once and looking rather foolish. Her shoe rolled down the stairs with an awful clatter as she said:

"Oh, good morning... I just got my shoes a bit wet... It's rather a wet morning, isn't it?... How do you do? How did you know my name?"

It was, of course, Miss Ballinger's friend and the man who had been at the telephone last night. She felt certain that it must be Mr. Grandon, but she did want to make sure before she saw Jon. And so, standing halfway up the stairs, with one shoe off and her hair shining with the wet and her heart thumping with the excitement of the encounter, she asked him who he was.

He smiled at that. Rather a slinky sort of smile under his little black line of a moustache.

"I am Mr. Grandon and happy to make your acquaintance... I hope we shall be friends," he added with a little foreign bow.

So she had been right all the time, and there was some connection between Mr. Grandon and Miss Ballinger! She was nearly mistress of herself again as she ran up the stairs, carrying one shoe but forgetting the other. On the landing she flashed him one of her special smiles.

"I don't see why not," she said as she brushed past him.

"Miss Penny," he called softly. "Miss Penny, I hope I did not disturb you when I was at the telephone last night?"

For a moment she was dumbfounded. Then - "I don't know what you mean," she gasped, and ran down the crooked corridor. As soon as she had turned the first corner she leaned against the wall and wondered once again where she was. This house really was absurd! Then she heard a muffled, unmusical humming which she recognized as Jon's, so she padded on down the corridor still wearing the one shoe, and when she turned another corner it was to see her cousin's untidy head peering round an open door.

"So there you are," he said. "Have you gone mad or something? Or been walking in your sleep? Do you *have* to walk round in only one shoe?"

She pushed him into the room and shut the door. She closed it carefully and quietly, instead of slamming it as usual, and then stood with her back to it

and looked round.

"I say, Jon, I'm sorry about that clod, but you did look funny. It was a good shot really! You know I'm not much good at throwing, but I got it in first time."

But Jon did not laugh. He just looked cross and went over to the basin and squeezed out some paste on to his toothbrush. Penny tried again. It was not quite as easy to tell him as she had expected.

"Come on, Penny! If you've really got something to tell me, do buck up and get on with it."

She poured out her story, while he listened impatiently. Once or twice he tried to interrupt, but she brushed him aside.

"Let me finish, Jon. We've got to stick together on this and that's why I wanted to tell you all about it before we met at breakfast... Well, there I was standing on the stairs... absolutely *transfixed with terror*, Jon... and listening to him telling somebody that *we'd* arrived..."

"What do you mean? *We* had arrived..."

"I'm telling you, aren't I? Give me a chance..." and she made the best of her opportunity to keep him listening.

"... and it's all very mysterious and horrid, Jon," she finished. "You remember that your mother told us last night that she didn't really like him and now we know for certain that he's something to do with that funny old Miss Ballinger..."

"We don't really know that, Penny. We can't be sure."

"Of course we know. Didn't he come to meet her at the station and didn't she try to get rid of us in the railway carriage so that we shouldn't see him meeting her?"

Jon nodded.

"If you're right, I suppose that would be because after we'd told her that we belonged to the *Dolphin* she realized that we should soon know him... But why, Penny? It doesn't make sense."

"Oh, I don't know why! That's what we've got to find out, isn't it? That's going to be our big job. Why, Jon, our adventure started before we got here."

"Well, Penny, you can't be sure that he was talking to that rum old Miss Ballinger on the telephone, can you?"

"No, I can't be sure, but I'd bet anything that it was her... Those papers he mentioned, Jon! He said he'd find them and meet her at the old mill tomorrow... It's just like a story! Anyway, I hate that Grandon man. He made me lose my shoe coming up all quiet and slinky like that and I think he's vile."

"I'm looking forward to seeing him close. I couldn't really see him at the station. Just a black hat. You have all the fun, Penny... Oh, gosh! That sounds like a gong and I suppose we'd better go down to breakfast."

"What are we going to do?" Penny asked.

"We'll talk about it again after breakfast. Meanwhile, don't say anything to Mother, because I'm going to tell her that I'd like to meet this mysterious Mr. Grandon, and maybe we've got all the wrong ideas."

Penny snorted. "Not on your life! Do you think I dreamed it all last night?"

Jon turned round. "I never thought of that," he said. "I'm always telling you that you eat too fast and you excelled yourself at supper! Where have you left the other shoe? Are you going up to put on another pair?"

"No, I'm not. I'm sick of those stairs. The other is down in the lounge somewhere. We'll go down that way and cross over the yard. Come on."

"We'll have to get used to going the other way to our rooms by Monday," Jon said as he shut the door behind him. "Don't fly into a rage, but you look

a bit of an ass wearing one shoe!"

Downstairs, in the lounge, Fred Vasson was now polishing the brass. After Jon had answered his "Good morning," Penny said:

"You don't happen to have seen a shoe about, do you, Mr. Vasson? It happened to fall downstairs just now and at the time I didn't bother to come back for it... I was in rather a hurry," she finished lamely as she saw Fred's expression of astonishment,

"A shoe?" he muttered.

"Yes, like this. Only the other side of course," and she extended the shod foot for inspection.

Fred slowly shook his head.

"No, miss," he said solemnly. "No, miss. I haven't seen a shoe and I've been all over the floor, as you well know, miss. Was it *after* your walk it fell off, did you say?"

Jon grinned and Penny flushed and peered vaguely about under one or two chairs. Then the door opened and Mrs. Warrender came in, followed by Mr. Grandon, who was carrying Penny's shoe rather in the way in which the Prince's herald must have carried Cinderella's glass slipper.

"I was about to send the maid up to your room with this shoe, Miss Penny," he smiled. "Doubtless you left it on the mat when you came in from your walk. Allow me!" and before she realized what was happening, he was on one knee and lacing up her shoe. She mumbled her thanks and then followed her aunt and Jon across the yard and into their own sitting-room.

Penny settled down to her breakfast as quietly as she could, hoping that the episode of the shoe would not be referred to again. But it was.

"I don't quite know what you've been up to, darling," her aunt said as she passed her a cup of coffee, "but I have an idea that it's something you shouldn't. Mr. Grandon came over here with your shoe in his hand - at least,

he said he thought it must be your shoe - and said that he would like to meet you both. It seemed to me to be a little peculiar for him to have your shoe, but of course I just told him that you were like that!"

Penny reddened and took a hasty gulp of coffee, but before she could answer Jon looked up and said:

"Oh, you know what Penny is, Mother. She was just having a bit of a rag with me and happened to drop her shoe. Your Mr. Grandon is very polite, isn't he? What do you want us to do today? Can we help you indoors as it's so wet? We haven't learnt our way about the house yet."

His mother flashed a quick glance at Penny and then smiled. She was really very understanding.

"That's something you had better learn to do, I agree," she said. "Hurry up with your breakfast and then I've got a surprise for you. I kept it specially for today. Jon! We shall have to fix a 'Private' notice on your door because you are really in the guests' part of the house, but I just had to let you have that room. Penny's doesn't matter, because nobody will ever find their way up there!"

"I can't find my own way," Penny smiled.

When at last they had finished, Mrs. Warrender said:

"I was thinking before you came, that when the hotel is full - and, of course, we hope that it will be all the summer and at times like Christmas and Easter - there isn't going to be much room for you both. We shall always have our meals in my sitting-room, but I can't put up with Penny's untidiness and you can't use your bedrooms for anything but sleeping in - at least Penny can't. I realize now that you ought to have a place of your own and I think I've been lucky enough to find you one. Come and see if you like it," and she led the way upstairs again.

"You'll soon find your way about," she said. "Remember that Jon's room is in the corridor on the hotel side, but that the corridor crosses over the yard to our side. The first staircase down here is to the kitchens, this one is up to

the staff bedrooms, this is only a little one and leads to more hotel rooms and a bathroom... Now, here's the bridge and the stairs to the right lead up to my bedroom and down to Mr. Grandon, and up here to the left is Penny's own staircase... Yes, come on. We're going up here again."

"I'm not going to have Jon criticising my room," Penny broke in. "It's nothing to do with him, and anyway it's tidy now."

"He needn't look at your room. I wasn't going to show him."

"But this staircase doesn't lead anywhere else, Auntie? There isn't anything else up there, is there?"

"Come and see for yourself. Squeeze in front of me. Now, let's open your door here and get all the light we can... Now can you see?... What's in front of you?"

The door of Penny's bedroom was on the right of the little landing, the walls of which were neatly panelled in dark oak.

When the door was opened there was enough light for Penny to see that there was nothing in front of her but the panelling. She turned a puzzled face to her aunt.

"But it's just the same wooden wall. I can't see anything else there. What do you mean?"

"Let me look," Jon broke in. "I'll make a guess that it's a secret door or a sliding panel... Look, Penny. Isn't that a hole in the wood on the right...? There! Just by your hand!"

Mrs. Warrender said, "You've got it, Jon. It isn't a secret door really, and I can't think why it was put there at all, but it is difficult to see unless the other door is open. Put your finger in that hole, Penny. Can you feel the wooden latch? Press it upwards and push the door inwards and there you are - halfway to your surprise!"

Penny squeaked with excitement as the door opened easily to her touch and showed them that the little staircase continued upwards.

"Here, Jon," his mother said. "Take this key and go ahead with Penny. You can open what you find at the top!"

The stairs were very narrow and steep, but one sharp turn brought them on to another still smaller landing facing a tiny arched door with big iron hinges and a massive iron lock - rather like the old doors sometimes found at the bottom of stairs in a church tower.

"Let me get at it," Jon said, "I can't open it with you in the way!" Penny was so excited that she stood meekly aside while he fitted the great key. He used both hands to turn it, but the lock shot back easily enough, and when he grasped the big iron handle and pulled, the heavy door swung quietly towards him and as he stepped back to avoid it he trod on Penny's foot.

"Mind your head as you go in," Mrs. Warrender called. "The doorway is very low."

They crowded in and there was a long silence as they looked round. They were in a narrow room right under the roof. The walls, like the stairway outside, were panelled in oak and the floor, which was bare, was very uneven. On the right, where the beamed ceiling sloped down sharply, were three narrow windows of thick greenish glass which reached to the floor. Penny found that she had to kneel to look through them. Opposite the door was an old brick fireplace with iron dogs still on the blackened hearth.

"Well, what do you think of your new home?" Mrs. Warrender smiled from the door.

Penny ran over and flung her arms round her.

"Do you mean this room is ours, darling? Our very own to do what we like in?"

"That's what I thought! There's not much furniture, as you see, but that is a very valuable table and I should think it must have been built up here, for

they could never have got it up the stairs in one piece. And you can have those three chairs and there's plenty of room in the two cupboards, and I suppose there's no reason why Jon shouldn't build some bookshelves if he's careful not to spoil the woodwork... There's something odd about this room, Jon, and I don't quite know what it is. It seems strange that such a nice room should have been built in this way under the roof. That fireplace is really old and has been used a lot, and as soon as I found the room I wondered why it should have been used at all for living in."

"Perhaps it was a hiding place?" Jon said.

"A secret room?" said Penny.

Mrs. Warrender dusted the table top and then sat on it.

"But it isn't really secret, is it? I mean anybody could find that little door outside Penny's room. It isn't really hidden... No, I believe there is some sort of a mystery about this room and that it is one of the reasons why I've given it to you both. It is your own room and you can do what you like here. You can have a fire if you like, and if you want to be up here at night you can go out into the town presently and see if you can buy an old oil lamp and hang it from one of the beams. Or better still, ask Fred if he can find one hidden away somewhere. Fred can generally find anything. But you must carry your own coal and oil and you must promise me to keep it clean yourselves, because I have told Mr. Grandon that none of the staff are to come past Penny's landing... You've got your key and, so far as I know, that's the only one in existence, so I shan't be able to come up here again unless I'm invited."

"You will be, darling," Penny promised. "But you'll be the only one... I think this is the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me, don't you, Jon?"

But Jon had just seen a big, black tin box in a corner over by the fireplace, and although he was really just as excited as Penny, all he said now was, "What's that box, Mother? Did you know it was there?"

"Of course. I nearly forgot to tell you. See if you can lift it on the table here, Jon... Help him, Penny. Good!" She rummaged in her bag and produced another key, while the children stood by expectantly. "Here's the key to the box, Jon, and take care of that, too. The box is full of the old papers, books and things which were left for us, with the house, by dear old Uncle Charles. The solicitor, Mr. Harding, told me that Uncle thought that you, Jon, might like to sort out all the other papers and things for me. What are you grimacing about, Penny? Have you got a pain?"

Poor Penny, who had been trying to catch Jon's attention with a very meaning wink at the mention of the papers, tried to turn it into a laugh.

"No, thanks. Not a pain really. Just a bit of stitch, p'raps."

"I did tell you, didn't I?" Mrs. Warrender went on, "that everybody here says that the *Dolphin* was one of the inns most used by smugglers in the old days. I suppose that was because of its position and because there was a quick way down to the river by the steps at the end of the street there."

Mrs. Warrender looked down at her hands and went on.

"I'm going to tell you a secret, and it's to be kept a secret, too, although I don't see how there can be anything in it really! Mr. Harding, who is rather musty but rather an old darling, told me, with lots of hums and haws, that for as long as he can remember it has been said in Rye that smugglers' treasure was hidden in the *Gay Dolphin* or somewhere near it... Don't look so solemn, Penny! I'm sure it's only an old story... Anyway, Uncle Charles must have known all about these rumours, and Mr. Harding hinted that he bought the *Dolphin* in the first place because he believed that he would find the treasure himself. But he never did find it, and it is just possible - just a crazy idea, I think - that there might be some sort of clue in that old box... Somehow I don't believe in stories of hidden treasure, because they always turn out to be stories and nothing more; but since I've learned to love this funny little town and lived here, I could imagine that this house would be as good a place as anywhere for treasure to be hidden - and found, too, for that matter."

She got off the table and walked over to the door and seemed to be looking over their heads when she spoke again.

"And, darlings, there is one thing more, and it must be a secret between the three of us. It would help me very much - help us all - if you *were* able to find some treasure quite soon... Good luck to you!" and she slipped out and closed the door.

Jon stood quietly twisting the key of the black box between his fingers; but Penny, after two impetuous steps towards the door, wheeled round to him and flung up her head.

"Jon! Jon! She was *crying*, Jon."

Her cousin nodded. "I know. We'll have to find some treasure, Newpenny."

3. Saturday: nt 8 April 7

After Mrs. Warrender had left them alone in their new home neither Jon nor Penny felt that they had much to say to each other - or perhaps it was that they both would have liked to have said a lot but found it difficult to put their thoughts into words?

Jon stood by the table just looking at the big black box and fiddling with the key. He was suddenly feeling much older than his years as he remembered his mother's brave smile and the way in which she had said, with a joke, that if they found any treasure it would be a great help to her. He supposed that he had not given much thought really to what she was doing to keep him at school, and although he and Penny treated the *Gay Dolphin* as just an amusing adventure, it could not be much fun really for his mother to have to give up their home and come down here to a strange place without any friends and start to run an hotel. Mother had told him that it would never have happened if Dad had come safely home from Normandy, but he had not returned and they had a medal instead.

Jon polished his glasses violently and then looked round for his cousin. She was kneeling on the floor by the window tracing something on the pane with her finger. As he watched, the sun must have come out between the scudding rain clouds, for her red curls suddenly glowed in the stronger light. He straightened his shoulders. "There's only the three of us," he thought. "Just Mother and Penny and me. And Penny is only a kid really. She wouldn't understand what I'm thinking."

As he looked over to her again, wondering how to break the silence, she spoke first; spoke quietly and without looking round.

"Jon," she said, "why do you think Auntie said that about the treasure? You know - that bit just as she was going out, about it being a help to her if we did find it... She didn't sound very happy, did she? She's lonely, Jon, that's what it is. It's easy for us to have fun, but she hasn't got your father any more." She gulped. "We're all she's got to help her really, and we're not here all the time, although I wouldn't mind staying away from school next term...

And she thought of this super place for us, and although she half-pretended that all this about the treasure was really a joke, I believe that she'd be jolly pleased if we could find it."

Jon nodded soberly from the table on which he was now sitting.

"Yes, Penny. I think she would, too. I think she's more worried than she tells us."

"Well, we've got to help, then. There's only us, Jon. Let's swear to find this treasure."

"But we don't know that there is any treasure," he said cautiously at last. "It would be awful to let everybody think we were going to find it and then flop!"

Penny flamed at him. "*Tell* everybody! Of course we shan't breathe a word to anybody, you idiot. Not even to Auntie, until we've found it. Least of all to her!"

"That's all very well, Penny, but we haven't got any clues."

She jumped up and rubbed her knees which were sore with kneeling.

"You are so *dull*, Jon! I bet you've got a box full of clues. Have you forgotten the box already? I don't see why there shouldn't be a clue in this room. It's the sort of place that's made for clues... I bet this room was used by smugglers and I expect mine was, too, 'cos it's just underneath... Come and look at the window and see if you can make out these letters. Maybe they are a clue. Maybe we can start looking for the treasure right away after you've read this. I can't do it. The letters are funny and I think the first word is God. Come and look."

Jon laughed and got off the table.

"Look," she said, as her grubby finger rubbed away some of the dirt.

"God Save England and ye Towne of Rye," Penny read out triumphantly. "That's it. It's not much of a clue for us, is it? We must ask somebody here if

it used to be a watchword or something... It might have been a password, though, mightn't it?"

"Doesn't help us now, anyway," Jon said. "But it is interesting. It's been scratched on with a diamond. Nothing else is hard enough to mark glass like this... Now, I've got an idea, Penny. It's raining hard again... Let's spend the rest of the day up here. Let's get a lamp and hang it from this beam and I'll fetch some wood for a fire, and perhaps Mother would let us have some food and then we'll lock the door and go through the box."

Penny agreed that this was a good plan, so Jon locked the door behind them and they went downstairs to see what they could find. So that no time need be wasted, Penny went by herself to find her aunt and beg for provisions.

Jon found Vasson in his den off the yard. Fred was busy with something in a vice, but when Jon told him that his mother had said that he might know where there was a hanging oil lamp, he stopped his work and said:

"Now that be very unaccountable, fur I kin put me hand upon the very thing... Used to hang over door to lounge before they had electric... There, Master Jon... Will that do?" and from under the bench he produced an old copper lamp with a reflector and a glass chimney and a chain to hang it by.

Then he showed Jon the oil tank and the wood shed where the kindling and logs were kept, and Jon filled a sack with the latter and toiled up the narrow stairs with it on his shoulders. The sack was difficult to manoeuvre up the narrow stairs past Penny's room. She was before him - he could hear her singing something quite unrecognizable and banging about with a broom. Suddenly she stopped and he called:

"Open the door, Penny. I'm nearly stuck with this beastly thing."

She heard him and ran over to help him up the last few stairs.

"It's all right," she said. "I found your mother who says we can do what we like and she told that funny old cook to let us have what we wanted for an indoor picnic and the old dear didn't seem too pleased about it when I told her some of the things I thought we should need... I told her we would like a

kettle and a saucepan and some coffee and some cocoa because I like cocoa better although you say it's a sissy drink, and some milk, and I thought we could cook some sausages, too, but I hadn't quite got the nerve to ask for a frying pan! Maybe you'd better do that! I think she'll like you. I expect she likes boys best."

She paused for breath and looked fixedly at his feet.

"What's the matter with 'em?" Jon asked as he dropped the sack. "Gosh, but it's dirty in here. It was fresher before you started work on it."

"What have you got on your feet, Jon?" Penny asked.

"It may seem an odd habit to you, but I wear shoes," he explained patiently.

"Have you got rubber soles?" Penny persisted.

Jon stood on one leg to see.

"No, I haven't. Have you gone silly? I know you don't wear shoes before breakfast if you can help it, but I can't see why you're interested in what I wear."

Penny put down her broom.

"Come over here and tell me if you see what I see." She led him over towards the fire, but stopped a yard from the bare hearthstone.

"Look!" she said. "That's not your shoe and it's certainly not mine, and I know that your mother didn't stand over there this morning, and I'd bet anything that she didn't wear rubber soles anyway... Now, can you see it?" and she pointed to the floor which, as yet untouched by her broom, was covered with a thin film of dust. In one place, about a yard from the wall, was the mark of a rubber sole. It was quite clearly defined and there was no mistaking it for anything else.

"Somebody must have brought that box up here," Jon continued. "I expect it was that solicitor chap. Mother could hardly have carried it up those stairs. P'raps Fred did it for her?"

"P'raps he did," Penny agreed. "But I'll look at his shoes when I get the chance... I don't know, Jon, but it looks *new* to me."

Her cousin knelt down and looked at the footprint more closely.

"You're right, Penny. It must be fairly new because there's hardly any fresh dust over it."

"Somebody's been up here before we came," Penny persisted. "And I'm sure it's all very sinister, Jon. Auntie said this was our secret place and that everybody had been told not to interfere with us."

Jon laughed. "Mother said that there was only one key, didn't she? Meanwhile, you'd better fix on a plan for looking at everybody's shoes! I'll leave that to you, Penny. You're best at shoes."

"Well, you can laugh, but I still bet it's sinister," she said as she swept all round the footprint. "I shall remember that pattern anyway."

So while Penny swept and polished, Jon laid and lit the fire, so that the flames were soon flying up the wide chimney and the glowing embers falling to the stone hearth from the high iron bars. Then he went down again for the lamp and a hook, while Penny fetched the kettle and saucepan and a basket covered with a white cloth.

Jon made a few more journeys while she was laying one end of the big table. He brought up some notebooks and a pile of his own books, besides a big pitcher of water and some glasses which Penny had forgotten. On the last trip he met Mr. Grandon, who smiled at him curiously, while Jon tried to look as if it was quite a normal thing for him to carry a jug full of water in one hand and two glasses in the other down the hotel corridor at this time.

The meal was great fun and they soon forgot the mood of a few hours ago when Mrs. Warrender had left them. The rain had stopped now and the sun shone fitfully over the rooftops and through their narrow window, making strange, wavy shadows on the floorboards. The logs in the fire spluttered

and crackled, and their scent and the pleasant warmth of the flames helped to make the old room a friendly place.

At last they pushed the remains of the meal to the far end of the table, rolled back the cloth and lifted up the black box again well into the light.

"We've got to have plenty of room to spread things out," Jon said as he put the key in the lock; and "Oh, gosh," Penny shuddered, "p'raps it's a skull and some mouldering bones!"

The lock clicked and the lid swung open easily enough, but there were no bones - just some bundles of papers and a few old books and some rolls which looked as if they might be maps.

Jon moved Penny aside. "We've got to do this properly. Sit down and let's look at everything in turn."

But it was not easy to do this, for some of the bundles were letters and old bills, and the old-fashioned writing was too difficult for either of them to read. After some hesitation, Jon put these on one side, meaning to come back to them if they could not find something more exciting. They picked out two of the books next and banged so much dust out of them that Penny sneezed violently.

There was another big, flat book next, and in this was pasted a number of newspaper cuttings. They looked at a few of these and found that they all referred to smuggling and smugglers on Romney Marsh. There were also some descriptions, cut from old magazines, of the capture of a gang of smugglers and of their trial in the old Court-house in Rye. Another article, cut out and pasted in the book, told the story, illustrated by quaint, old-fashioned engravings, of the Battle of Brookland.

Then they found the roll, easily the most exciting discovery so far. Penny held one end while Jon unrolled it from the other and held it down. They saw at once that it was a rather primitive, sketchy map and, when they had turned it round and got it the right way up, Jon realized that it was an attempt to show part of the Marsh near Rye and the coast beyond it to the west.

"Look, Penny! That's Rye, because he's drawn it on its hill... and there's something drawn on the sea just by Rye... What is it? A bird?"

"Of course it's not a bird!" she shouted as she held down her end again. "It's us, Jon! It's the *Dolphin*. At least it's meant to be a dolphin, I think, and it's got a silly grin on its face, so I s'pose that means it's gay."

Jon looked admiringly.

"P'raps you're right," he said. "It might be! But why should the man who drew this map suggest the *Dolphin*?"

"Because of the treasure, silly! I bet this map is the clue, and I bet it's in the *Dolphin* somewhere - the treasure, I mean!"

"There's nothing written on it or drawn on it that looks like treasure though... Let's look at some of the other things. Winchelsea is shown, look, and he's drawn a little hill or volcano down by the sea, there... And that's a windmill, there - and here's another at the back of Rye, and it looks as if it's in the middle of a wood, which is stupid..."

"Jon!" she said hoarsely. "Jon! Don't you see, we've got it! He said 'the old mill' on the telephone. There you are! There it is!"

"Well, here are two," Jon agreed, "and we don't know which one. There's something here which might be a mill."

The more they studied the map the more exciting it became, and they both began talking at once and interrupting each other until Jon pushed Penny's hand away and let the map roll up.

"Wait a bit!" he laughed. "We'll never discover anything this way. Let's empty the box first and just be certain that there's nothing else as important, then we'll put everything else back and really study the map!"

Penny agreed reluctantly, and they went back to the box.

"There's a whacking great book at the bottom here," Jon said after they had lifted out some more magazines and two smaller books about Rye. "This is

what made the box so heavy," and he tipped the box on to its side so that the book fell forward. Something small also tinkled against the box and fell to the floor, and Penny groped about for a moment before she found a small key. When she got up from her knees Jon was gazing in rather a puzzled way at the big brass-bound book before him on the table.

"It's a Bible," he said. "What they call a Family Bible, I think. It's locked. Is that the key?"

Penny handed it to him.

Jon fumbled with the key and he felt the lock click back and the heavy clasp opened.

The Bible lay open before him on the table and he was staring stupidly at a large white envelope which he held in his hand.

"Look!" he whispered. "It's addressed to me! But it can't be. Do you think it's a trick?"

Penny shook her red head in bewilderment. The envelope was addressed clearly enough - "Jonathan Peter Warrender, The *Gay Dolphin*, Rye, Sussex."

"It must be a joke, Penny. It was in the front of the Bible... I just opened the cover and there it was staring at me."

"If you open it maybe you'll find out how it got there," said Penny, practical for once!

But Jon kept on turning it over between his fingers. "I think I ought to show it to Mother," he said. "Do you think she knew it was there? P'raps it's a joke?"

Penny hopped from one foot to the other.

"Don't be so infuriating, Jon! Open it! It's addressed to you, isn't it? It must be for you and for nobody else."

"Come on then! Let's see if we can solve the mystery. It's getting dark again in here. Come over to the window."

He pulled over a chair and Penny pushed him into it and leaned over him with her chin on his shoulder. The envelope contained many sheets of thin paper covered closely with neat writing. This is what they read together in the little hidden room under the crooked roof of the *Gay Dolphin*, while the rain lashed at the window-panes and the wood ashes in the old fireplace trickled through on to the stone hearth:

"The *Gay Dolphin*,

"Rye, Sussex. "My dear Great-Nephew Jonathan,

"It will seem very strange for you to receive so long a letter in so unusual a way from an old man you have never seen. But if you are as sensible and steady as I hear, you will soon realize, I hope, why this comes to you in this way. I understand that you were fourteen years of age when your father gave his life for his country, so I think you are old enough to know that life is going to be very difficult for your mother in the future. Your mother is my only niece, and for a number of reasons it is many years since we met. But your mother has never been too busy to remember a lonely old man, and almost since you were a baby she has found the time, several times a year, to write me happy, friendly letters that have told me about you and of her own plans and hopes. And this, my boy, is a gift which is very rare - a gift in which the young make the old feel that they are not forgotten.

"Your mother wrote to me when your father was killed. I wished very much to do something to help her - and, indeed, to help you and your cousin through her - but the only thing which I had was the *Gay Dolphin*, and that I have sadly mismanaged for many years because my main interest in life has been the study of the past, and of my own beloved town of Rye in particular. I decided, therefore, to ask your mother to take over the management of the *Gay Dolphin* for me and that you should all come and make this place your home. A few days after I had made this decision, and before I had told your mother of it, several important things happened. Firstly, I was taken ill, which was not surprising, considering my age; and secondly, I was persuaded that an operation would save me much pain and

probably prolong my life. This letter is being written to you, together with a few others, before I go into hospital, and the fact that you read it now will tell you that at least I have been saved much pain. You will know by now, too, that I have left your mother the *Gay Dolphin* and all that is in it. I want you to make it your home, not only because it was my home or because you have Sussex blood in your veins, but because I believe that somewhere within its walls there may be treasure trove which will help to make your mother's life much easier."

Jon sighed and turned to the next neatly written page.

"If you know anything about this part of England," the letter continued, "you will have heard that the Marsh and all this coast as far as Cliff End has for centuries been much used by smugglers, and the people of the Cinque Ports - there are several books about the Ports left for you to read - are the descendants of those who made the first wooden ships for the British Navy. The men of the Ports have always been wild and independent. Time and time again these towns have been attacked and plundered from the sea, and when our ships were not fighting for our King, they were generally engaged in a little piracy on their own account. So you will see, Jonathan, that Rye has a history thrilling enough to stir the blood of any proper boy, for her streets have echoed to the cries of sailors home from the seas, of pirates returning with rich booty and of bloody fights with the French, who many a time swept in with fire and sword. And not so very long ago Trader's Street echoed to the tramp of the King's Men as they searched for the lace and brandy, brought in from France in exchange for wool from our Romney sheep.

"The *Gay Dolphin* is almost as old as Rye itself. I am not sure how old it is, but there is no doubt that it was much used by smugglers, and I am now fairly confident that it contains some secret which I have never discovered. There have always been rumours that some fugitives from the Battle of Brookland found their way to Rye and that, as they were hotly pursued, they hid some booty in a place which has yet to be discovered. Three of these fugitives were caught and hanged, the story goes, but two escaped. Rye rumour says that all five sought shelter in the *Dolphin*, but this has

never been proved, although I believe that the inn would be obvious sanctuary for them.

"I want you to understand that although I have always known of these rumours and old tales of hidden treasure, I only thought of them as stories until yesterday, when the clues attached to this letter were brought to me at a time of my life when they are of little use to me. I believe the parchment to be genuine and can say little more to you now than that. They were brought to me by the son of an old servant who had just died. This old man, who served me for many years here in the *Dolphin*, now claims that he is a direct descendant of one of the men who escaped capture after the Battle of Brookland and sends me the clue without any other message, beyond one of affection and remembrance for a kindness which I once did for him.

"Here, then, my dear boy, is something for you to do - something which, at your age, I would have given anything to tackle. There may be no treasure, but if there is and you can find it for your mother, you will have done a lot to help her. Do not be too disappointed if you find nothing, and do not expect too much. If the clue is genuine other people may be after it, so I suggest that you be on your guard and be careful to keep the secret. And do not worry your mother with all this unless you have to do so.

"I have a little more to tell you. I have put this letter in the Bible for a reason which may soon be plain to you; and the contents of the box should help you in your search, for I have collected together many papers and letters which refer to smuggling in this district. The map, I think, deserves a lot of study. It was found in a bricked-up cupboard in the lounge here many years ago, and it seems to show tracks which would be used by smugglers on the Marsh and on the levels to the west of Rye. You will see that the artist who drew the map seemed to think that the *Dolphin* was the centre of Rye, and certainly all the tracks marked lead through our ancient town.

"And so, my dear boy, I wish you well and all good fortune in your search. Remember always, whatever happens, how your father would expect you to behave and what your mother hopes for you. But it is because I believe that you will remember these things that I have decided so suddenly to pass these papers to you instead of to my old friend Mr. Harding, who would not

believe in treasure if he saw it before his eyes. All that I have told your mother of this is that I want you to have the box.

"I am sorry that we have never met.

"Your affectionate Great-Uncle,

"Charles."

Jon held the last page still and gazed out of the window as Penny slipped down on her knees beside his chair and read the final sentences. Then she was quiet, too, and when he looked round it was to see tears on her cheeks. He did not feel very cheerful himself and had the sense to wait in silence till she said, in a very little voice:

"The clue, Jon? Where's the clue?"

It was pinned to the last page of the letter and was but a dirty piece of parchment with a few letters and figures drawn on it:

"I was right, you see, Jon! I was always sure there was a treasure... and I'll tell you another thing, if you haven't thought of it... This scrap of paper is what Mr. Grandon wants... This is what he's looking for... These are the mysterious papers. You'll see that old Uncle Charles is right. Other people are after this..."

She whirled round, with her back to the window and with her elbows on his knees and her chin on her clenched fists went on, "You *promised* we'd be in this together, didn't you, Jon? Just the two of us. You'll share everything, won't you, until we find it? You *swear*, Jon, don't you?"

He rumpled her red head.

"Of course I do. I can't do this by myself, Newpenny. Get up! You're hurting my knees!"

They went back to the table and looked at the muddle.

"Thirsty work," Jon said. "Will you go down and get some tea and I'll put the kettle on here and tidy up a bit, and then we'll settle down to this clue."

When the dirty tea things had been pushed up the table to join those still remaining from lunch, Jon took out the parchment again; but the longer they looked at it the less sense it made. Penny suggested that "nt" might be a place marked on the map, but they could not find any separate letters or figures there when they searched.

"The date is clear enough, anyway," Jon said at last. "I wonder if it refers to a letter in one of those bundles in the box?"

"It isn't clear at all," Penny argued. "It might be the 8th of April 1857, 1867, 1877 or 1907 or 1927 or 1937, or it might be April 7th with just an 8 in front to make it more difficult. And I don't see how one of those letters could be anything to do with it because Uncle Charles said that he'd collected those from all over the place... Any-way, there's no connection between the clue and the letter that I can see."

Jon nodded gloomily. "And this 'nt' beats me. It might be somebody's initials. I believe I've got a brainwave, Penny. It might be... Look! Uncle said he put my letter in the Bible for 'a reason that may be plain to you'. Do you think that 'nt' could mean New Testament? P'raps that's as far as he got with the clue himself, but it might mean that he put the letter inside the Bible just to start us off?"

Penny looked at him admiringly.

"Of course you're right, Jon. Find the New Testament - but I can't think what April 8th has got to do with it."

Jon undid the clasp of the great Bible again and opened it on the table.

"Find the page where it starts off Matthew, Mark, Luke and John," Penny said brightly, "and all the rest of the books come after with Revelation at the end, which is easy to remember."

"You've given me another brainwave, Penny. Let's see what the eighth book is? Here it is. Second of Corinthians... But what does April mean?"

"Listen, Jon! When they give out a text they give the chapter after the name of the book and then the number of the verse, don't they? Just suppose that in some way April is a clue to the chapter in Corinthians?"

Jon turned over the big pages. "There are thirteen chapters. Let's look at the beginning of each one to see if it says anything about spring or the time of the year."

They could not find anything which made sense, although one chapter began with the words, "*Would that ye could bear with me in a little foolishness*" and another with, "*This is the third time I am coming to you.*"

"We shall have to read it all, Jon! I'm sure that's the only way. Come on. You read the first chapter and I'll read the next."

"Wait a sec, Penny. We said just now that it might have something to do with the time of the year. April is the fourth month, isn't it? Let's try Chapter Four..."

"And verse 7," Penny broke in excitedly. "That's it, of course."

And when they read the first words of this verse they felt sure they were right: "*But we have this treasure in earthen vessels!*"

"We've got it! We've got it!" Penny chanted, and in her excitement flung her arms round Jon and hugged him.

"What's come over you?" her cousin said, coldly disengaging himself. "I think we've solved the meaning of the clue, but we're not much nearer finding the treasure. 'Earthen vessels' might mean an old vase."

Jon began picking up the maps, the books and the papers and putting them back in the box.

"I've got a headache," he said. "Let's go out even if it is still raining. I'd like some fresh air and we can talk as we go... We've done very well, Penny, and we'll find these earthen vessels somehow, but I don't like the sound of them because they may well be buried somewhere... Pack those dirty crocks up while I lock the box."

"What are you going to do with the clue?" Penny asked as she piled up the plates on the tray with a clatter. "Shall I sew it in your shirt?"

"No, thanks! I'm locking everything in the box except the clue, and that I'll keep in my wallet... See me put it in, Penny! Now, I'll carry that tray and you take the key and be sure to lock the door after us. The fire's out so that's safe enough."

They went over to find Mrs. Warrender.

"Have you been up there all day?" she asked when they found her. "How have you got on and do you like the place?"

"It's wonderful, darling," Penny replied. "We shall practically live there while we're at home. I hope you don't mind."

"I mind very much! There's no proper fresh air up there, and you'd better go out now for an hour. It's stopped raining and should be a lovely evening. Go and explore the town and I'll have some supper ready for you when you come back."

This was what Jon really wanted anyway, so they went for their macs.

Outside they walked to the wall and looked to the west where the sun, which had been invisible nearly all day, was now painting the stormy clouds with glory. Below them the brown river ran fast under the wooden bridge towards the sea, but over the levels a faint mist hung, so that only the top of the old keep of Camber Castle was visible.

"The mist looks as if it might be the sea come back again," Penny said. "See how it covers all the land like water, Jon, and see how Winchelsea and Rye, too, stand up like islands. It was like that once, wasn't it?"

Jon nodded. "I was just wondering what Mr. Grandon would do if he knew what I'd got in my pocket book. We'll have to look at that map again carefully, Penny. We've got to do something about those windmills tomorrow you know, and there's a lot of other things we've got to find out."

"The map showed a mill behind the town here, didn't it?" Penny said. "Let's go and find it now and when we come back we'll see Fred Vasson. He'll know everything about Rye - he told me he was born here - and he'll tell us all we want to know. Come on. We've got to go past the big church, anyway."

"Let's go down these steps first and see the river," Jon said. "We can ask one of the fishermen the way to the mill, and I do want to have a look at those boats."

Penny agreed and they set off down Trader's Passage by the side of the *Dolphin*,

They turned left at the bottom of the Passage and at once found themselves among the fishermen and boat-builders. The strong air smelled muddy and fishy and, oddly enough, the mist which they had seen from above did not come from the river, for down here it was clear. After chatting with a fisherman, they walked back up the narrow streets and looked into shops, with the crowds of country people thronging the narrow pavements.

"I love Saturdays. Specially Saturday nights! Don't you, Jon?"

"I like this Saturday night, and I like this place, too. It is different, as old Miss Ballinger said, isn't it? Look, Penny. This must be the Land Gate the fisherman told us to go through. It's like that one at Winchelsea. Up the hill outside, he said."

They found the windmill easily enough. About a mile from the town, it stood in the corner of a field, not far from a farm and was certainly very old, though the sails seemed in good order and it looked as if it might work.

"This seems a silly place to meet anybody," Penny said, "but he said the old mill, and this looks old enough..."

"I'd like to see it working, anyway," said Jon. "But let's get back now and find Fred and ask him if there's another windmill round here. It's getting dark and cold and I want my supper."

So they walked back down the hill and watched the lights of Rye come up in the hundreds of tiny, crowded windows.

Their steps echoed on the cobbles under the old Land Gate as they walked up to the church. Penny slipped her arm through Jon's and for once he did not ask her what she was doing.

"I know it's Miss Ballinger he's going to meet tomorrow," she said, "and we shall have to trail him to find out."

"If there's another mill," Jon said, "we shall have to go to one each. I only hope there aren't three. I've been thinking about earthen vessels, but it doesn't make sense, does it? This is going to be a real puzzle, but I think we've got to find out first what this man Grandon has to do with it."

"I'm tired of calling him Mr. Grandon," Penny replied as they swung round into Trader's Street. "I'm sure he's a villain really and I know jolly well we shall have to expose him to somebody in the end... We know he's after something which really belongs to your mother, Jon, and I hate him. When we're talking about him I'm going to call him 'Slinky'. It suits him better. He's slimy... Miss Penny, indeed!"

"Look at that," Jon interrupted. "They've got our *Dolphin* sign floodlit. Doesn't it look fine?" And when they reached the hotel Fred Vasson was standing on a stepladder adjusting one of the new lamps.

"Ready for Monday," he grinned down at them. "Reckon we've got to look smart next week. Reckon we've got to give the Missus a good start."

"When you come down, Fred - I say! I do hope you don't mind me calling you Fred and not Mr. Vasson," Penny said. "We want to ask you some things about Rye. Can we come and see you in your little den after supper?"

"You'll both be welcome if your mother doesn't mind," he said. "Bring some mugs and I'll make you some cocoa."

So, after supper with Mrs. Warrender, they rushed off to Fred.

He had drawn a pair of old red curtains across the window and when the door was shut the heat from a hanging oil lamp and a stove was almost overpowering.

Fred had cleared part of a bench for them to sit on, and while he watched the milk in the saucepan he began to talk to them about Rye. They could hardly keep pace with his stories, and he did not seem to mind how many questions they asked just as long as they were about this part of the country.

"What does 'God Save England and the Towne of Rye' mean, Fred?" Penny asked.

"It means just that, lass. Ryers have allus thought themselves a bit separate like and Ryers would know that it was one of their own who said or wrote those words. Rye didn't allus go quite the same way as the rest of England!"

Then he told them that Owlers were the Marshmen who ran the wool from the Romney Marsh sheep to boats which would run it tax-free out of England to France.

"We've got very interested in windmills since we came here, Fred, and we found one up on the hill at the back there. Does it work?"

"Yes, miss. Her works all right. She's worked for many a long year!"

"Are there any more near here?" Jon put in at the crucial moment.

"Not in Rye, but there's a rare old ruin of a place at Winchelsea in field not far from churchyard. Most people about here call that the old mill, but 'tis said, I'm told, that all would be built about the same time... Now pass me your mugs and I'll tell you about the Battle of Brookland..." and as he turned to the stove Jon looked at Penny and mouthed silently, "Told you so. Just our luck."

4. Sunday: The Mill

Jon was wakened next morning by the sound of the great church bell and footsteps on the cobbles outside. He raised himself on the pillow and looked out of his little window towards the sea. The sun was up and there came to him, across the levels, that smell of salty mist and early autumn that, afterwards, always brought back to him so vividly the first exciting days which he had spent in Rye.

Jon felt under his pillow and touched the big iron key of their upstairs room, and this reminded him of all that had happened yesterday.

It did not seem very likely that there could be any treasure - or not a big enough treasure to warrant Mr. Grandon spying upon them and hunting for it himself. That sort of thing just did not happen!

But there could be no doubt about the letter from Great-Uncle Charles. That was real enough. And the clue which they had rather luckily deciphered was surely genuine, although Jon sighed with dismay when he thought of "earthen vessels". He was rather afraid that they would have to go through all the books and letters in the box to see if there was anything there to help them.

It was then that he noticed a white square of paper on the carpet just inside the door. There was no name or address on this, but "Very Private" was scrawled across one corner in indelible pencil. Jon thought he recognized the writing and, realizing that there would not be much more rest for him now, he put on his dressing-gown and sat on the edge of the bed.

"JON," he read. "I have been thinking again and this is all VERY SERIOUS. Slinky must be watched all the time, and very specially today before he goes out to meet Miss B. at the old mill. Have you thought which mill? Remember he told her that he would have the papers. Have you still got the clue safely? I know you will be snoring right up to breakfast time and you were so shirty when I woke you yesterday that I'm writing this instead, but we have got to DOG Slinky today without fail. I am going

downstairs now to find him and I will keep him talking till you come or until breakfast time."

"Penny."

"Oh, gosh!" Jon muttered to himself as he tore the note into small pieces and threw them into the wastepaper basket thoughtfully provided by his mother. "Oh, gosh! I had a feeling she'd be up to something. She's probably sitting outside his bedroom door waiting for him to come out."

Then he washed and dressed as quickly as he could and went downstairs. Penny was not in the lounge and neither was Fred, so he went out into the yard. His mother's front door was locked; he lifted the flap of the letter-box and bent down in the hope of seeing through into the hall. Just at that moment the door shifted slightly under his hand and began to open inwards, and he heard Penny say softly and sweetly:

"Good morning, Mr. Grandon. I just happened to be passing in the hall and heard you try the door. It's a much nicer morning, isn't it? I'm so glad..."

"Don't be an idiot, Penny," Jon interrupted. "Open the door properly and let me in."

"Jon!" she gasped. "I thought it was Slinky. I thought it must be Slinky... I hoped it was anyway," she added in a burst of candour.

Jon squeezed past her and shut the door behind him. "What are you supposed to be doing anyway? Suppose I had been Grandon? What would you have done?"

"I should have engaged you in conversation," Penny said coldly. "And what are you doing here, might I ask?"

"You might well ask! I found your silly note and came right away to find you, although why I wasted my time I don't know."

"You've said that before," Penny said brightly. "But what note do you mean?"

Jon sat on the stairs and pulled her down beside him.

"Do you mean to tell me that you didn't write a note and put it under my door this morning saying that you were going to find Slinky and talk to him? Did you or didn't you?"

Penny nodded brightly. "Oh! That note, Jon! Of course I did, but I'd forgotten just for a moment that I'd written to you. I suppose I was thinking about him so much that when I saw the letter-box waggle I was sure it must be him."

"Well, don't let him catch us sitting here," Jon said. "Whenever he meets us it seems as if we're doing something silly - you with one shoe on and me carrying a great jug of water, for instance. Let's go outside in the sun and talk about it till breakfast. There's no sense in making him suspicious... But I would like to know if he wears rubber soles?"

Half-way through breakfast Mrs. Warrender said, "You'll both be ready for me at a quarter to eleven, won't you?"

"Ready, darling?" Penny asked innocently. "What for? We're always ready for you."

"Church," said her aunt. "And not in those clothes either."

Penny looked shocked. "You don't mean that I'll have to wear a hat, do you, Auntie? I never wear a hat now, you know. I don't think I can get mine on."

Jon sniggered at this last remark, but was quickly quelled as his mother turned on him.

"And Jon, too. In your blue suit, please, Jon. And a decent collar for once."

Penny was looking very worried.

"But Auntie, darling. I don't think we can both go this morning. Do you mind if one stays at home on guard? Perhaps the one who stays could go to Evensong, if that's what you think we ought to do!"

"What do you mean - on guard?"

"It's just a game, Mother. She doesn't mean anything really. We'll be ready for you."

When they were alone again Penny said, "Jon, I've just had an awful thought. Have you got the clue safe?"

He opened his pocket-book and glanced inside.

"Yes! It's there. Let's go to our room and have another look at the map. We've got some time yet before we need change."

He felt in his jacket pocket. "The key!" he gasped. "I haven't got it... I left it under my pillow..."

They dashed up together, but the key was still where Jon had left it when he had seen Penny's note pushed under his door.

"It's such an enormous key," Jon said as they climbed Penny's stair, "that it's awkward to carry around. It's heavy, but I'll have to do it."

Then he put the key in the lock and pulled the heavy door towards them.

"Now I've got to find the key of the tin box, but I know I've got that somewhere..."

When the box was opened they spread the map over the table again. After a while Jon said, "You know, Penny, we can't do anything practical until tonight. We shall both have to go to a mill, and we shall have to go separately and hide so that we can see who it is that Slinky meets and listen to what he has to say. Let's not worry about the map or these papers any more until we know for certain what he's after! He doesn't realize how much we know and he might easily give something away tonight. And if I keep the clue safe in my pocket he can't see that, so that even if he is after the treasure he hasn't got as far as we have. We're a step ahead of him and he doesn't know what we've got. What worries me is 'earthen vessels'. We

shall have to put our heads together over that one, Penny, but the answer may be in this box."

Before Penny could answer there was a step outside and the sound of a knock on the door. Jon dropped his pocket-book and slammed down the lid of the box. Then he ran over and called, "Who's there? What do you want?"

His mother's voice answered:

"I'm not coming in, Jon. I only wanted to make sure that you were up here. Is Penny there, too? You've only got a quarter of an hour to get dressed and I think it's too bad of you both..." and as they looked at each other in guilty silence they heard her steps go down the stairs. Then they rushed at the box and crammed everything into it except Jon's pocket-book. Jon tried the lid after he had locked it, just to make sure, and then pocketed the key. Then they were just as careful in locking the door of the room before they rushed downstairs to change.

It was fortunate that the *Gay Dolphin* was near the church, but it was a silent and breathless trio that hurried into the big porch just as the two golden cherubs by the unusual clock overhead struck the first stroke of eleven.

By the time the sermon began Jon was feeling much cooler. He slipped his hand into his pocket and felt the cold iron of the key. Thank goodness, he had remembered to bring that with him. And the clue, too! Or had he brought the clue? Slowly, gently and unobtrusively he opened the leather covers, knowing that the next second he would be reassured. But the clue was not in its usual place!

In a wild panic he began to turn out the contents on to the pew beside him and hardly noticed his mother's agitated whispers. He did realize that Penny was leaning forward mouthing wordless questions, but he was far too worried to do more than shake his head vaguely as he went again through the contents. There was no doubt of it. The clue was no longer there! He felt feverishly in his other pockets as he rose with the congregation at the end of the sermon, but without success. Then he remembered that there was a chance that the parchment might be in his old jacket which he had worn

after breakfast, but he continued to fidget miserably until the end of the service. Penny managed to get next to him as they crowded down the aisle.

"What happened, Jon? What have you lost?"

"I can't find the clue. Did you pick it up off the table when Mother knocked on the door?"

"Of course I didn't! Oh, Jon, how terrible."

"It might be in the pocket of my old jacket. The one I was wearing this morning."

"Come on, then! Let's dash up to your room and see if it's in your old coat."

But although they searched every pocket and even the hole in the lining, and then turned the pockets of his old trousers inside out, there was no sign of the missing clue. Jon sat back on his bed, ran his fingers through his hair and destroyed his Sunday parting. "This is grim, Penny," he said. "I just can't remember. Let's look upstairs. I may have stuffed it back into the box when we had to rush away."

They dashed up the stairs and, to their great relief, found that the door was still locked. Inside all seemed to be as they had left it two hours ago. They closed the door behind them and Jon slid the bolt across. The box was still on the table, but the precious scrap of parchment was not to be seen.

"Let's see if the box is still locked," he said. "I've got the key here."

Penny crossed the room first and then stopped suddenly and sniffed.

"Can you smell anything?" she whispered as Jon was trying the lid of the deed-box.

"No, I don't think so. This is all right. It's still locked."

"Stand still for a minute... Jon, I'm quite sure that someone has been in this room while we've been out."

"Don't be silly. How could anyone have been here? The door was locked, wasn't it? You saw me unlock it. The first thing to do is to search this box, because the clue may have slipped out of my pocket-book on to the table and I may have pushed it into the box with the other papers when Mother called us."

But Penny was still standing over by the fireplace with her nose tilted more than usual and a rapt expression on her face.

"You look like that advertisement for chocolate," Jon said rudely as he pushed up the lid of the box. "Come and help me."

"I've got it," Penny cried exultantly,, "It's a woman that's been here. I can smell scent. It's very faint, but I'm sure I'm right. Can't you smell it, too, Jon? Do try?"

He snorted and sniffed. "No," he said. "I'm sorry, but I can only smell dust!"

Suddenly she rushed across to him. "I've got it," she shouted. "It's not a woman. It's him. It's Slinky! He's been up here while we've been at church. I knew he would as soon as we were out of the way. I'm positive I'm right. The smell is the beastly stuff he puts on his black, greasy hair."

"But how could he get in?" Jon said. "Even if you're right, how could he get through the door? I locked it and took the key to church with me and it's never been out of my pocket."

"He's got another key, of course," Penny said triumphantly. "He must have."

Jon looked worried. "I must ask Mother if she knows of another key. I believe she told us there was only one... Now, let's turn this box out once more and then we must rush down to lunch."

They took everything out of the deed box, but there was no sign of the parchment.

"It's gone, I'm afraid," Jon said despondently. "I suppose I must have dropped it. I know I had it in my bedroom this morning, and I know I had it

when we came up here after breakfast."

"That's it," Penny agreed. "You've dropped it and Slinky was watching to see us go out and then he came up here and unlocked the door with his key and now he's got the clue... But I tell you one thing, Jon. He doesn't know as much scripture as we do, and maybe he will never find 'earthen vessels'."

"Well, if he's got it we've not so much start as I thought. We shall have to buck up and solve the riddle. I think we'd better come up here again after lunch and go through these other papers... Come on."

"How are you getting on upstairs?" Mrs. Warrender asked at lunch. "Have you found anything interesting yet?"

"Yes, we have," Jon said. "But you don't mind us keeping it a secret for a while, do you? Did you by any chance go up to our room while we were getting ready for church? You know - between when you called us and the time we were ready?"

"Of course I didn't," Mrs. Warrender replied. "I told you I wasn't coming up without an invitation, and I only came then because it was getting late and I didn't want to send Mr. Grandon or Fred or one of the maids."

Jon asked whether she knew if there might be a duplicate key to the little door somewhere.

"Of course there might be, but I have never seen it. Fred knows about the room, too, and you can ask him if there is a spare anywhere. I believe I asked him once, but I can't be sure. I shouldn't worry about it if I were you, and don't spend all your time up in that stuffy old room. Are you going out this afternoon?"

Jon smiled across the table.

"There's lots of things we'd like to tell you, Mother, but we'd rather wait until we're certain. You don't mind, do you?... And we'll swear we'll go out later, and if we want tea we'll have it upstairs, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind," Mrs. Warrender replied, "but don't take everything too seriously, will you? See you tonight for supper, then."

They spent two hours upstairs, but got very tired of searching long before Jon flung the last bundle of papers back into the box and slammed down the lid.

"I'm sick of this, Penny! My head aches with reading and I can't make much of most of these old letters. If the kettle's ready, let's have some tea before we go."

They munched some buns while they examined the map, and then Jon said it was time for them to go.

"Look here, Penny," he said. "I'm sorry we've got to split up, but I'm sure it's the best thing. I'll start now, because I'd better go to Winchelsea. Fred said it wasn't far from the church, and this map certainly marks it at the back of the town."

They locked everything into the box again, made the fire safe, packed up all the tea things, locked the door behind them and crept down the stairs.

"I don't really know the best way," Jon said as they went out together. "I believe buses go along the road we came with Fred, but there must be a short-cut across the Marsh to Winchelsea. Come and start me on my way, Newpenny. You've still got plenty of time and we'll see if we can find a footpath when we get to the other side of the bridge."

They went together down the steps of Trader's Passage, past the boat-builders, over the bridge and then stepped out on to the long, straight road that led first towards Camber and then back towards Winchelsea.

"I should walk along the road, Jon. It's much safer and better for you, too. You know you don't get enough exercise! Good-bye. I'm going back now. Where shall we meet? I don't think we'd better go upstairs again tonight somehow... I think Auntie would be rather peevish if we disappeared again."

"We'll meet somehow. I agree that we shall have to be with Mother after supper, but p'raps we could slip upstairs just before we go to bed."

"Or *after* we go to bed. That would be more fun," Penny laughed as she blew a kiss to him and turned back towards Rye.

Jon kept to the road. Although the levels looked very tempting in the lovely light of the late afternoon sun, and although hundreds of sheep were grazing placidly between the dark dikes, it was true that there were no clearly defined tracks.

By the time he reached the hill which leads up to the Strand Gate of Winchelsea he was very tired, hot and out of breath. He was also very anxious, because it was after half-past five and he had yet to find the old mill.

The citizens of Winchelsea were enjoying the Sunday evening sunshine as he toiled under the gateway. He glanced over to the look-out from which they had looked over the levels for the first time on Friday and noticed a little group standing round a seated figure. He was wondering whom he had better ask about the windmill when, with a shock, he realized that the shape of the figure was familiar, and as it was seated on a camp stool and facing an easel, he had no doubt that the artist was Miss Ballinger. Fortunately, she did not appear to see him, so he hurried past, hoping most fervently that she would not call him back.

This was certainly rather puzzling, because it did not now seem that she was the person Slinky was going to meet - unless, of course, the windmill was very near and she could reach it easily.

He walked quickly up the street, hoping that he would not meet Slinky. At the door of the inn he asked a man if there was an old mill nearby.

Jon followed the directions and soon found that the town finished as abruptly to the north as it did to the south, although on this side the slope of the hill was more gradual. He went through a gate into an elm-fringed field, climbed a stile and found himself looking over flat country which stretched away into the blue distance of the Sussex Weald. The field before him fell

away sharply - in one place, and at the topmost ridge of the hill stood the gaunt, black ruin of a mighty windmill. There were no sails on this mill, and from where he was standing the sky showed through the timbers of the roof. This was certainly an old mill, if not the old mill, but it did not seem as if he would have much chance of hiding near enough to it to overhear any conversation that might take place outside. This gave him an idea. Suppose the meeting was inside the mill and not outside. Or, better still, was there a chance for him to get there first and hide inside in a place where he could hear all that was happening if Slinky met his companion just outside?

Then he noticed two things. The first was that the sun had disappeared; heavy clouds were coming up from the sea, and that without sunshine the old mill looked particularly mysterious and lonely. The second thing scared him at first, for it seemed to be a black hat, without a head inside it, moving slowly along towards the mill just on the level of the ground! A black hat suggested Slinky at once, and the old mill suggested the same person, but the poor man could hardly have shrunk to the size of a doll!

Then he had his big idea!

It must be Slinky who was walking along a ditch or a sunken path or road that was not visible from where he was crouching. After a little the black hat disappeared altogether, so Jon got up and ran along his side of the hedge in the direction from which the hat had moved.

His guess was a good one, for after a minute's running he came to a sunken road, climbed the gate and very cautiously made his way towards the mill. The road had obviously been used by the wagons which had brought the grain to the miller and later returned for the baker's flour. Luckily, the track twisted and turned more than once, but Jon moved very carefully and was certain he made no sound as he made his way cautiously round each corner. After a little he noticed a still burning cigarette stump so, very carefully and slowly, he climbed up the steep bank and by holding on with both hands to a little hawthorn bush he raised his head until he could see over the edge. He was astonished to find himself so near to the mill, though not so surprised to see Slinky leaning against it and lighting another cigarette. Jon held his breath, praying that his quarry would not look down as he threw his match away. Then he realized with a shock that unless he did something

definite at once it was more than likely that he would be found by Slinky's visitor, who must be due at any moment.

He had to think quickly, and as a thorn from the branch he was grasping was now hurting him badly, he let go and slid, as quietly as he could, down the bank into the lane. He lay still for a moment, but there was no sound from above except that made by the rising wind as it whistled through the creaking skeleton of the mill.

He went forward a few steps and noticed a little track running sideways up the bank, and realized that it must have been by this way that Slinky had reached the mill. He had been facing in the direction of Winchelsea, Jon remembered, so if he was both quick and quiet he ought to be able to run across the open space just ahead where the lane finished and hide on the opposite side of the mill. Even as he dashed from the shelter of the lane that had proved to be such a good friend, he wondered if he could hide under the ruin, for he now saw that it was built above the level of the ground and supported on great stone blocks. There ought to be room for him to wriggle underneath, although it did not look very inviting! As he ran across the open he was buffeted by the full force of the wind and realized that he was on one of the most exposed places for many miles around, but he reached the shelter of the mill, dropped to his knees and peered underneath. Against the light on the other side he could see Slinky's thin black trouser-legs flapping in the breeze. Then, bravely overcoming his aversion, he began to crawl over the filthy rubbish that had collected here through the years.

It was not at all pleasant; and he had only covered two or three yards before he realized that he would not be able to see Slinky's visitor, nor would he be able to overhear their conversation because of the noise made by the wind as it whistled under the ruin and tore through the broken woodwork above him. As he backed out on hands and knees he decided that all he could do now was to creep round the mill in the hope that he could hide near enough to Slinky and his visitor to hear their conversation. There would almost certainly be a door into the mill somewhere, but he could not remember whether Mr. Grandon had been standing by it when he had watched him over the bank just now. He began to edge his way round very cautiously and felt the great ruin groan and sway under his hand as it was struck by the full

force of the wind. Then he came to a doorway and to some broken steps which led up to another hole in the wooden walls above his head. He guessed that there was a "first floor" to the mill and that this would make an ideal hiding-place for him.

Suddenly the rain lashed across the field and he knew that Slinky would be looking for shelter. He looked quickly again at the rotting steps above him and decided that he had no choice. The last four steps had gone long ago, so he had to jump for the handrail and pull himself up. He was careful to put his weight on the sides of the steps and not in the centre, where they would be weakest, and although he felt one of them give under his feet he managed to get his hands on to the edge of the floor and pull himself to safety. Even as he scrambled up he heard voices and the sound of running footsteps. He had only just been in time.

When he got off his knees he saw that he was in a round room with a great wooden shaft running through both floor and ceiling. There were so many cracks and splits in the wooden walls that the place was quite light, and Jon noticed at once a big trap-door with a ring in the floor. He examined this carefully, but it fitted closely, and it was obviously much too heavy to lift. He put his ear down in the dust, but could hear nothing, and then moved over to the great shaft. This, of course, could not fit the floor so closely and there was a crack about half an inch all round, but he tried in vain to see through this. Then he lay down full length and, with his head against the massive oak shaft and his ear to the crack, found, to his excitement, that he could hear every word which was being spoken below.

A woman's voice was speaking.

"Well, don't let's spend any more time in this foul place than we need. Have you got it?"

Jon realized with a shock that this voice was certainly not Miss Ballinger's. It was a younger, more attractive voice and one which he had never heard before. There was a pause before Mr. Grandon replied:

"I have got something... something important, but I do not know what it means."

"Let me see," said the strange voice quickly. "All right! All right! No need to hold on to it like that... I only want to look at it, and I shall have to take it to her, anyway, so I may as well see it now... You know that you're not to be seen with her or even to know her at present, so you'd better hand it over to me at once. If you don't I'll tell her you kept it from me and you know you won't like what happens then... Come on. Let me see... But this doesn't make any sense at all... 'nt 8 April 7'... Wasn't there something else? Are you sure this was all?"

Mr. Grandon sounded a trifle sulky and Jon could picture him fingering his little moustache as he said: "There are other papers and I know where they are; but she must be patient. There mustn't be any signs or suspicions of burglary... This is not going to be as easy as I thought, but I tell that to you and not to her, you understand... But this paper that I have found? It must mean something, I think, because it is really old."

"Where did you find it? Tell me quickly because I must get back and tell her."

"Those children - and I do not like those children at all, and particularly that brat of a girl - have been given the Trader's room at the top, and they are up to something, but I have not yet had time to make sure... I think they have the other papers in a box which they are careful to keep locked... I was in the room this morning when they were out..."

And here Jon nearly whistled in amazement. He was still positive that the outside door had been locked when they went out to church. His leg was fast going to sleep and he shifted it gently as Slinky went on:

"... and this scrap of parchment was on the floor. One of them must have dropped it, I suppose... I would have you know that these children are not fools... they are not as I thought they would be, although it is true that I have had no experience of children of their age... They are a nuisance, and may even be dangerous, and I am thinking that they may know much, but are not aware of the meaning of their knowledge... We must find out quickly what this paper means... as quickly as we can."

"Yes," the other voice replied quietly, "and you must find out at once if these kids really know anything. And if you cannot find out for yourself we must take other steps. She will say that, I know. It is vital that we know what they know at once."

What Slinky would have replied to this quiet threat Jon never knew because at that moment he nearly cried out with the sudden sharp pain of cramp in his leg. Instinctively, he bent his leg and began to rub the calf, but his shoe scuffled across the floor and he heard the woman's startled exclamation, "What's that?"

Jon bit his lip to stop himself crying out as he heard Mr. Grandon say, "Only rats. Any old place like this is alive with 'em!" and then laugh as his companion screamed and ran outside. Mr. Grandon followed more slowly, but Jon was in such pain that although he crawled over to the opening, he dared not trust himself to the steps until the pain was easier. When he could walk again, he found the steps were difficult, but he managed the descent somehow without hurting himself.

The storm had passed now and the sun was shining brightly again as Jon made his way carefully along the sunken road and back into Winchelsea. He passed a few people, but there was no sign of Slinky. He was wondering whether there was another way out of the town without passing the look-out when he realized that it did not matter now whether Miss Ballinger was there or not, as she had not been the person with whom Slinky had made the appointment.

She was still there, however, and called out to him as he passed.

"Good evening, my young friend," she boomed at him over her easel. "So you have soon found Winchelsea. Come over here and tell me what you think of her... And where is the little red-head? 'Penny,' I think you called her... Ah, yes! Penelope, no doubt! A headache, eh? Dear, dear! Such misfortune on such a lovely day. So you are exploring on your own? Come closer, my boy, and tell me if you recognize the old gate. Twenty times I have painted this at different seasons of the year, and it never looks the same... It is the light off the levels, but I shall never be satisfied... What are

you telling me? That you have been exploring on your own? And what have you been exploring, my young man? Look at the dust on your knees!"

In horror, Jon realized that she had seen something which he had not noticed himself! He was wearing shorts today and his brown knees were grey with the dust of the old mill.

"I don't know where I've picked that up, Miss Ballinger, unless it was climbing an elm tree this morning after a wood pigeon's nest... I like your picture very much indeed. I think it's wonderful."

She went on with her painting; but while she worked she fired all sorts of inquisitive questions at him about the *Dolphin* and his mother and what he thought of the old house and whether he had explored it all yet.

"I'm interested in old places and old things," she said, "so be sure and let me know if you find any old papers or maps. And be sure that you don't take 'em to a junk-shop in Hastings or Rye. Bring 'em to me. I'll buy 'em from you."

Just then a bus came down past the church, and when Jon saw that it was marked "Rye" he called a hurried "Good-bye" and thankfully escaped. He swung himself on to the step as the bus slowed down for the sharp corner, and Miss Ballinger raised a brush in salutation and called:

"I shall come over and see you soon... Yes, you will see me in Rye one day; but you and your cousin must come and have tea with me in my bungalow... Don't forget! Good-bye."

Jon sat back and wiped his forehead. What a lucky escape from all those questions! He began to wonder whether Miss Ballinger had seen him pass her on his way to the mill and decided to wait for him to come back before asking him all those questions. But what did she know about it all... unless Penny was right and she was the mysterious "she" referred to by the woman who had met Mr. Grandon at the mill? He'd got plenty to tell Penny tonight, anyway, he thought as he got off the bus at the bridge and climbed the steps of Trader's Passage.

Penny was leaning against the wall at the top, pulling a tamarisk to pieces. There was a brooding look in her eye and she spoke before Jon could open his mouth.

"Don't tell me," she began. "Don't tell me now, because I can't bear it. I can see you've had a marvellous time.

I can sec by the silly grin on your face that you've had all the adventures. I knew you would. You chose Winchelsea mill yourself, didn't you? You jolly well knew that I'd have a miserable time. Tell me now before we go in to supper. Who met him?"

"I don't know who it was, Penny. I never saw her."

"You didn't see her? You went all that way and found the place and saw Slinky... I suppose you did see Slinky, didn't you?... Oh, you did? But you didn't see the 'her'? But, of course, you didn't *have* to see her because it was Miss Ballinger, wasn't it?"

He shook his head. "No, it wasn't. But I have seen her as well."

Penny put her head in her hands.

"Don't explain, Jon. Please don't tell me. I'll tell you what a marvellous time I've been having instead. No, listen. You must listen. I got caught in the rain and lost in that farmyard place and chased by a goat. Then I lurked round that horrible old mill for half an hour and got ordered out of the field by a *beast* of a farmer. And for the rest of the time I've been waiting and waiting for you, Jonathan, dear!"

But before Jon could tell her his story, Mrs. Warrender came out to find them. And after supper they neither of them felt they could leave her. Once, under the cover of the radio, Penny whispered, "Meet you in our room at midnight," but Jon frowned and shook his head. "Too late. I'm too sleepy. But if you'll knock at my door about seven in the morning I'll come up."

She grimaced her dislike of him and then nodded agreement to his last suggestion. Soon after the News, to her aunt's surprise, she went up to bed.

She did not care to admit it to Jon, but she was tired, too, and although she was keen to share his news she did realize that the early morning would be better fun.

But she nearly came back to find him when, at the bottom of her little staircase, she collided with Mr. Grandon - who was coming *down*.

5. Monday: Beach View

What are you both going to do today?" Mrs. Warrender asked at breakfast next morning. "Why don't you take some sandwiches and go out and explore while the weather is fine? There are wonderful sands at Camber, and there's the old castle, too, although I haven't been there yet. I can't do much with you today because the first guests arrive this afternoon."

"Oh dear!" Penny sighed. "What a pity! I don't think I'll like the *Dolphin* so much with strangers about. All right, Auntie - I know we're not supposed to see them and get in their way. We'll be good, I promise... But what are they like?"

"That's something we shall never know until they arrive, Penny. Until they come they are only names. And you mustn't talk about our guests as if they were - well, specimens!" she laughed.

"Well, I'm not going to worry about them," Jon said as he reached for the toast. "We three will stick together whatever happens, and we've got our room upstairs when you don't want us down here, Mother... Come on, Penny. Buck up. It's a good scheme to go out for the day."

As soon as Mrs. Warrender had gone to see about their sandwiches, Penny looked up and said:

"You can arrange what you like, Jon, but I absolutely refuse to do anything until you've told me what happened to you at the mill. Shall we go upstairs?"

Jon got up. "No," he said. "It's a grand morning. Let's go out and I'll tell you everything... Come on, little girl!"

They went over to their favourite wall and looked out over the swaying tamarisks to the Marsh, which was very green in the morning sunshine.

Then he told her his story. He told her how surprised he had been to see Miss Ballinger in Winchelsea and how he had only just got to the mill in

time.

"What I'm so wild about," Jon added at the end of the story, "is that my leg hurt so much that I couldn't get down to see the girl who was with him. She sounded young but, of course, you can't tell from just a voice."

Penny said, "I knew you'd have all the adventures, and that's why you sent me to the mill with the goat. I know it is. Anyway, I'm sure we're right about Miss Ballinger. She's in it. She knows all about it. I always thought so, and now I'm sure. She was the one they had to take the papers to."

"But why should she send the girl when she was sitting only a few hundred yards away herself?" Jon asked. "Why go to all that trouble?... Still, I must admit that she's a very odd person. She was most curious about us again when I spoke to her on my way back. By the way, she's going to ask us to tea. Can't think why. Shall we go?"

"Of course we will. I wouldn't miss it for anything. But the greatest mystery of all is how Slinky got into our room and took the clue while we were at church. He must have another key, and I suppose we shall have to ask Auntie to let us change the lock. Jon, I bet that footprint in the dust was Slinky's! He's been there lots of times."

"Maybe he has, but I don't think he's ever been able to open the box. I suppose I must have dropped the clue when we rushed out to church. I think I'll slip up now and get the map. It's safer with us than in that room, and we'll have another good look at it when we're out... You go and see if the sandwiches are ready, and don't forget a bottle of something because picnics always make me thirsty," and he wandered off indoors, leaving Penny still leaning against the wall.

She was wondering whether it was worth going into the kitchen yet when she noticed a boy wobbling down Trader's Street towards her on a bicycle. He looked over to Penny and jerked his head towards the hotel.

"Where's door?" he asked curtly.

"In the wall," Penny answered sweetly. "It always is."

The boy glowered at her and muttered something which she could not hear, and got off the bicycle Then he took a letter from his pocket and after some intense mental effort turned in under the archway. He did not look like an errand boy, and as Penny was by nature very curious, she followed him into the yard, where he was now standing on the cobbles looking sulkily first at one door and then at the other.

"I wonder if I can help you?" Penny asked in her very best manner and held out her hand for the letter. The boy looked at her with deep suspicion and then said:

"You live hereabouts?" and when Penny nodded he rather reluctantly handed over the envelope. Penny gasped. It was clearly addressed in a small but tidy handwriting to "Jonathan Warrender, *Gay Dolphin*, Rye," and marked in addition, "Bearer to await reply."

"You just wait here and I'll bring you the answer in a minute," she said, and dashed in to find Jon. She met him coming down the stairs whistling cheerfully, with the map roll sticking out of the inside of his coat pocket.

Jon crossed over to the window and slit open the envelope while his cousin stood on tip-toe and tried to read the letter over his shoulder.

"Winchelsea.

"DEAR JONATHAN,

"If you and your cousin can spare the time this afternoon I should be very happy if you would come and have tea with me. You may like to explore in this direction, and I shall be glad to see you and perhaps tell you some more stories of the Ports and the Marsh. I hope you will be able to tell the lad who brings this that you will be coming.

"Please give my kind regards to your mother.

"Sincerely yours,

"E. M. BALLINGER."

"P.S. - My bungalow is the fourth to the west on Winchelsea Beach, past the little hill at the end of the Beach Road."

After some discussion they agreed to go out for the day and finish up at Miss Ballinger's, so Jon went into the yard and said to the messenger:

"Tell Miss Ballinger, please, that we'll be glad to come and thank her very much."

"Can you understand that?" Penny added, "or would you like us to repeat it?"

The boy glared at her without speaking and then rode away, while Jon and Penny stood under the archway and watched him. Then, "Did you lock the box and the door?" Penny asked.

"Of course I did, and I've got the big key in my pocket. There are some other maps, too, you know, Penny, but they don't show as much as this one. Have you got the grub yet or are you going to keep me waiting again?"

"I'm going to keep you waiting, little man! If Auntie is in the kitchen I'll tell her we'll be out to tea. I'll meet you outside when I'm ready."

When she came out eventually with a heavy haversack, Jon was leaning against the wall studying the map. (You can see the map for yourself. It is printed at the beginning of this book.)

"Come and look at this again, Newpenny," he called. "I think I'm beginning to know what it means. Look! You can see the wavy rivers running round Rye? And the straight black lines must be the roads... You can see the kink in that crazy road between Rye and Winchelsea, can't you?... You know! The road that seems to be going away from Winchelsea all the time. The road where I tried to find a short-cut... Then, I think the dotted lines must be the tracks used by the smugglers. I can't think what else they could be. They're not boundaries."

"If you are right, Jon, I wonder why they don't show the dikes, because it would be the dikes that would be such a danger at night?"

"They couldn't on a map this size. P'raps they used a compass? Anyway, we'd better explore all these tracks as far as we can in the holidays and see if we can find any other clue which suggests 'earthen vessels', but it will be a big job and we'll start near home this morning... But there are one or two things we didn't spot before, Penny... First, I think there's a gallows or gibbet, or whatever you call it, on a little hill down by Camber Sands, and I should think that would be a good place to hide treasure------"

"Do you m-m-m-mean we'd have to dig all among the mouldering bones for it, Jon?"

"Well, we might. We've got to search everywhere, haven't we? .. Now look again, Penny, and you'll see that all the landmarks specially marked are linked by the dotted tracks and that most of these are all round this district. See how four tracks meet at Camber Castle. Then the two windmills are specially drawn in and, now I come to look at it again, the mill at Winchelsea seems to be the only place of importance there... Then there's that miniature volcano-looking thing right on the coast south of Winchelsea. I should think that's the hill near the Ballinger's bungalow, and I'm sure we ought to look at that... Then there's the inn down on the coast there, too. The track finishes there, so I think that inn was important. I'll tell you what we'll do today. I want to see the old harbour, so let's go to Camber Sands by the river and walk back along the coast to that little hill at Winchelsea Beach. I expect there's a bridge or a ferry over the mouth of the river... There's Fred! Let's ask him."

"Yes," Fred told them. "There's a ferry right enough. He's never side you want him, but you've only got to holler for him and he'll come over... Don't be forgetting the visitors 'ull be here time you're back, Master Jonathan, and you won't go banging about in the lounge, will you?"

So they went and said "good-bye" to Mrs. Warrender, and then Jon folded up the map so that it fitted properly into his pocket, took up the knapsack and led the way down to the iron bridge that crossed the river on the other side of the town.

"I just don't know what we're going to do about these 'earthen vessels', Newpenny," he went on. "I haven't got an idea and, you know, we might

wander over two counties and never find a clue."

They were crossing the bridge now and, as this was the first time they had explored this part of the town, they stopped for a minute to look down at the brown water filling the river as the tide came in. On this side of Rye they were on the edge of the real Marsh and could see at once that it was different from the levels round Winchelsea. It was wider and bigger in every way and stretched, as flat as a table, as far as they could see to the east.

They came down the slope of the bridge, which set them above the low level of the Marsh, and went off along the east bank of the river towards the sea. They reached the little town of Rye Harbour after an hour and walked on to the wide, white stretch of Camber Sands a little farther on and had their lunch on the top of the dunes.

After they had eaten, they walked barefoot back along the sands until they came again to the harbour and found the ferryman, who took them over the river. Behind an old black shed on the other side they looked again at the smugglers' map, and Jon said:

"We ought to be able to find this track here. On the map it's shown as near to the sea as we can get. Let's do the same."

There was no sand this side of the river and they soon found themselves walking behind a great bank of shingle, which in some places was strengthened by wooden stakes and old railway sleepers.

"Let's get on to the top," Penny suggested. "It's not very exciting down here."

"Maybe not," Jon replied. "But I bet we're walking on the smugglers' track. This would be a good place for them to go, I should think, and I expect there's another quick way across to Camber Castle, too. All right! Let's climb up."

Once up, they realized that this was the artificial bank built to keep back the sea. Here the beach was of shelving shingle divided by old breakwaters, and

although now that the tide was out there was some sand, it was not a very inviting prospect.

"I wouldn't like to be here when there's a storm," Jon said. "Can't you imagine how the waves would crash against this bank?"

Penny turned her back to the sea and looked back over the levels to Rye, still standing serene but lonely on her hill.

"Yes," she agreed, "and you can see how they've had to make the bank stronger in some places. But, Jon... What a thrill if this bank did break and the waters rushed across to the two towns! It reminds me of that story of a little boy who put his hand in a hole in a Dutch dike and saved his country! I s'pose that little hill straight in front is the one marked on the map. It's like a pyramid from here and there's a little black hut on the top! And I can see the houses beyond, too... Now, the sun's gone in and the wind's cold. Let's go down behind the bank again and walk on the smugglers' path."

They slithered down, bringing a rush of shingle with them. To their right now the grey ruin of Camber Castle seemed very close, and Penny suggested that it was just the sort of place for hiding a treasure.

"It might be," Jon agreed. "But we've got to make up our minds now what we're going to say to Miss Ballinger. We've got to agree about this, so once we've got a story we must stick to it. You think she's behind all this, don't you, Penny?"

She nodded violently. "I know she is."

"Well, I'm not quite so sure as you are," her cousin went on, "but even if she is, it would be crazy of us to let her see that we're suspicious. I wish I knew why she suddenly sent us that note this morning and why she so specially wants us to come today. I can't help feeling that she wants something from us in a hurry... I expect you're right really, Penny, and she's the one who told Slinky to find the clue and bring it to her."

"We shall know soon, anyway, because we're nearly there," Penny replied. "Let's make up our minds quickly because she's probably got the clue by

now."

"If she has that will prove it," Jon agreed. "But she'll be clever if she gets as far as 'earthen vessels'! We must pretend to be quite innocent and try to lead her on if she keeps on asking us questions..."

"She'll do that," Penny interrupted. "She's always asking questions and that's why we're asked to tea. You're right, Jon. If we stay simple long enough she'll give herself away. Would you like me to be a bit silly? You know - not quite, quite..."

"For goodness sake, don't play the fool, Penny, or you'll spoil it all. Let's make up our minds not to talk too much and maybe she will give herself away. This is a rum place, isn't it?"

The bank here was very high and behind it the grassy levels seemed, in contrast, to be much lower. The track upon which they were walking was bordered on their right by a lagoon, which looked as if it filled as the tide came in. Before them rose the steep little hill which Penny had seen ten minutes earlier, and on the seaward side of the hill was a row of squat cottages. A rough road ran inland towards Winchelsea from the beach, and beyond that again were some modern bungalows and some ramshackle huts made out of old railway carriages.

Penny wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"What I can't understand," Jon said, "is how she can live here if she's an artist. It's all so ugly. And yet we know she's an artist because she sketched you for some extraordinary reason!... Fourth along, she said in the note. Come on and let's get the party over," and they turned on to the beach and trudged west along the shingle.

"There she is," Jon said. "Waiting for us. Don't forget what we said and don't play any of your silly tricks what-ever she says or does."

"Just beginning to wonder if you'd lost your way," she boomed. "Glad you could come. How are you, my dear? I met your Jonathan yesterday and he was good enough to admire my work... Come along in..." and she led the

way down the shingle path edged with large stones towards the faded green door of the bungalow.

Miss Ballinger apologized for the size of the hall.

"Not much room here, I'm afraid, but that's my fault and not yours... Trouble is I'm too big for the house... Come along in here and let's have some tea," and she opened another door and led the way into a room with a cheerful fire in a miniature kitchen range and a table loaded with cakes and jam.

When they compared notes later they both agreed that their hostess was very entertaining and for half an hour at least she did not ask them many questions - or none which were difficult for them to answer. The tea was wonderful and, as they had had nothing but sandwiches since breakfast, they did full justice to it.

After tea Miss Ballinger invited them to see some of her work. There was no doubt that she was a clever artist, and for a time they were both fascinated by the sketches and paintings that she selected from piles of canvases stacked untidily on the sofa in the front room.

"Why, here's the *Dolphin*!" Penny called excitedly. "You must have painted this from our wall."

"Yes, I did, but that's some years ago now," the older woman explained. "I did that when I was staying there once, but I'd like to do a better picture one day. Has your mother decided when she's going to open?" she asked Jon.

"We're opening today," he said. "I hope you'll come while we're at home."

Miss Ballinger nodded. "I'll ring up your mother some time or come over and see her. I'm fascinated by old places and old things. I collect old maps and papers, and my house in London is full of them. You must both come and see them one day... And that reminds me that you can do something for me before you go back to school."

"Of course we will, Miss Ballinger," Penny said sweetly. "We'll do anything we can, won't we, Jon?"

Miss Ballinger had her back to them as she spoke and was standing by the window, but she turned at Penny's remark and her glasses flashed so that they could not see the expression in her eyes.

"I'll tell you what you can do for me, then," she said. "Just now I'm making a collection of old letters, books, documents and maps - I'm particularly interested in maps - dealing with this district. I get all my stories of the Marsh and smugglers from papers I have already collected, and I'd like you to help me to find some more."

"I don't quite see how we could help you do that," Jon said. "Of course, we would if we could, but we're not likely to find any old papers or maps."

"I thought you might look round for me... I'd pay well for anything you found like that. A little ready cash is always useful at school, I've been told, and if you like I'd be glad to pass over a few pounds now for you to go shopping for me."

"Oh, Miss Ballinger!" Penny exclaimed as she nudged Jon so violently that he staggered. "We couldn't possibly do that!"

"Well just remember I'm interested if you find any such documents *whenever and wherever* you may come across them. I'm a very keen collector, and collectors, you know, will give almost anything to get what they want."

Although the last words were spoken with a smile as she turned again to look at them both, Penny sensed a warning or a threat behind them, and when Miss Ballinger spoke again, quite softly, she moved instinctively a little nearer to Jon.

"And that reminds me," their hostess was saying. "Didn't you tell me on the train that your mother was keeping some old papers for you to see? Are you sure you haven't anything which you could sell me, Jonathan? Perhaps some of those old documents which are quite worthless to you would be

just what I'm looking for. If I come over one day soon perhaps I could look through them?"

"What papers do you mean, Miss Ballinger?" Jon answered innocently. "I didn't say we'd looked at those old things yet, did I?"

"Didn't you? How very odd. I wonder what made me think you had. How very extraordinary... *Have* you looked at them yet?"

"Well," said Jon hesitantly, "we have found one or two old papers, and there was a map, too, wasn't there, Penny? But, of course, we couldn't let you have any of those. After all, Miss Ballinger, those are ours, and we wouldn't want to sell them, if you see what I mean?"

"I don't see what you mean at all," Miss Ballinger snapped so sharply and with such a distinct change of expression that Penny jumped. "There's no reason whatever why you two children shouldn't let me have those old papers. They're worthless to you, I'm sure, but they must be just the sort of document I want... And the map?... I'll tell you what I'll do, my young friends, I'll give you five pounds for that map!"

"But, Miss Ballinger," said Jon, "we couldn't take money like that! Of course we couldn't!"

"It was only a scrappy old thing, wasn't it, Jon?" Penny went on. "Just a lot of little sketches and some red crosses and dotted lines."

"Red crosses?" Miss Ballinger interrupted. "Are you sure of those, because those are the sort of maps I'm always looking for. Where is it now? Could I see it?"

"Knocking about at home somewhere," Jon said carelessly. "I can't quite remember what I did with it. Can you remember, Penny?"

"No, I can't; but you're jolly careless, Jon."

"Oh, well, I suppose I'll find it somewhere sometime."

"Now, listen to me. That map may be worth a lot of money, and I think you'd better go home at once and see that it's safe, and then perhaps you'd let me see it sometime. Just bring it along, or I'll come over if you'll send me a postcard. I'll soon tell you what it's worth!" and turning to Penny Miss Ballinger went on: "When's your birthday, my dear? Would you like the *Dolphin* painting?"

"Well," Penny replied, rather taken aback, "I've just had it. In July, actually... Of course, I'd like that picture of yours, but I couldn't possibly take it. Not possibly, thank you all the same."

Miss Ballinger waddled to the sofa, found the picture, rolled it up and pressed it into Penny's unwilling hands.

"Nonsense, my dear! Glad for you to have it. Take it, please, and all I ask is that you remember me if you find any old papers. I'll buy *anything* you find... Funny about your birthday, but somehow I thought it was in April... April the seventh, to be precise... No?... Can't imagine how I came to think that was the date. Perhaps it's yours, Jonathan?"

But not by even the flicker of an eyelid did Jon give away that April the seventh meant anything to them.

"No, it's not mine either. I expect you dreamed it, Miss Ballinger. I dream dates sometimes... Come on, Penny, we must be going because we've got to walk to Winchelsea along that road we saw by the hill, and we'll get a bus from there."

"Thank you so much for having us," said Penny, shaking Miss Ballinger by the hand. "We have enjoyed it so... You must come and see us some time."

"Thank you," their hostess said grimly. "I most certainly will!"

"Keep quiet. Go steady," Jon muttered as they left "*Beach View*" and shuffled through the shingle again. "Don't let her see us talking and don't try and look mysterious. Just look slightly soft, like you usually do!"

But when they were out of sight and had turned on to the road they both started to talk at once.

"She gave herself away, Penny. I knew she would! She was clever about the birthday date, though, wasn't she? I know jolly well I nearly gave the game away myself at that."

"What date? What did she mean, anyway?" Penny said wonderingly.

Jon clapped both hands to his head in despair. "April the seventh, you idiot! The date on the clue. Don't you remember?"

"Oh, of course!" Penny laughed. "I'd forgotten about that stupid scrap of paper."

"Forgotten about that stupid scrap of paper!" Jon repeated, as if in a trance. "She's forgotten already. Don't you realize that everything is proved now? It shows that Slinky passed the clue to someone else, who passed it on to Miss B. There's no doubt of that now. She thought we might give ourselves away when she mentioned April the seventh. I nearly jumped, but she was watching *you*, luckily for me. No wonder it didn't affect you!"

"I just thought she was mad," Penny said complacently. "I always hated dates, anyway, and I never remember them... But, Jon! She does want that map, doesn't she? What do you think she would have done if she had known it was in your pocket?"

They were walking now on a rutted track leading inland from the beach. Just before it joined a more important road they moved aside to make way for a cyclist, who looked at them curiously as she pedalled down towards the bungalows. She was a very pretty girl of about twenty, wearing a white mackintosh and sandals on her bare feet. Jon turned to look at her as she passed.

"You'd know her again, wouldn't you?" Penny said coldly as they reached the road. Jon looked at her in surprise, but had the sense to say no more.

They were still talking about Miss Ballinger a quarter of an hour later and had nearly reached the corner of the road under Winchelsea hill, where they hoped to stop the bus, when the sound of a bicycle bell behind them made them jump apart.

"Thank goodness I've caught you up," said a pleasant voice, and they turned to see the girl in the white mackintosh. Before they could answer she came up behind them and went on, "I've got a special message for you from my aunt, Miss Ballinger, and she asked me to be sure to catch you up. It's for you, actually," she said, turning to Jon and smiling radiantly.

"For me?" he said doubtfully. "Why just me?"

Penny blessed him for this and moved round to his side so that the girl no longer had her back to her.

"I'll tell you why. It sounds crazy, I know, but I was to tell you that after you'd gone she thought about that old map that you said you'd found, and the more she thought about it the more certain she was that she wanted it for her collection." She stepped a little closer to Jon and said quietly: "She wants that map so badly that she'll swop it for a motor-bike!"

"A what?" Jon gasped.

"A motor-bike! And you can choose it yourself! Bring her the map, she said, and you can go and buy the bike when you like..."

"The bus, Jon. Here's the bus," Penny interrupted. "Come on! We *must* catch it!"

Jon came out of his dream.

"Thanks for telling me," he said, "but we must catch this. Good-bye!" and he started to run after Penny.

"Cheerio!" the girl called. "Let her know quickly, won't you? Any bike you like, she said."

They caught the bus, but it was very crowded, and Jon had to stand by the door, while Penny sat on the edge of a seat farther up. She was almost shaking with rage at the stupid way Jon had listened to the girl. Even now he was looking vacant as he held on to the strap and swayed with the bus.

Back in Rye they climbed the steps of Trader's Passage in silence. Penny did not feel like starting a conversation and Jon still seemed in a dream.

At the top, though, outside the *Dolphin*, they both saw the same thing and stopped. A little black Scottie dog with one ear cocked was sitting solemnly under the archway regarding them with curiosity.

"I said we wanted a dog here," Penny whispered, "and now here he is. He's wonderful! Here, little black boy! Here!... Oh, wake up, Jon, do! Anyone might think that girl was a witch and had put a spell on you!"

"I don't know about a spell, Penny, but, you see, I nearly met her before."

"What do you mean - *nearly* met her?"

"I did nearly meet her. That was the girl who met Slinky at the mill. I'd recognize her voice any time."

6. Tuesday: Allies

Only twelve more days and then school again," Penny said at breakfast next morning, "and we've got a lot to do still."

"Where are you going today?" Mrs. Warrender asked.

"Camber Castle. We both want to see it. I've been reading about it in some of those old books."

"What old books?" his mother asked.

"The books in the box - the Great-Uncle Charles' box upstairs - of course."

"I've been very good," Mrs. Warrender smiled, "and I haven't once asked you what you have found. Anything interesting yet?"

"Nothing really," Penny broke in quickly. "And what are these new people like?"

"I think they're nice. There are some children, too, and a dog. I didn't really reckon on a dog, and I don't think the best hotels have them."

"We met the dog last night," Penny said. "He's a darling, and I covet him."

Mrs. Warrender smiled and said, "Have a good day and don't be late for dinner this evening."

Two hours later Jon and Penny had left the Winchelsea road by a farm gate and were heading towards the grey bulk of Camber Castle rising ahead of them like a rocky island in a green sea.

"I've got a feeling," said Penny pensively, "that we're going to discover something thrilling at Camber."

Jon said, "I tell you what, Penny. I nearly told Mother everything at breakfast this morning. You mustn't think I'm backing out, but I don't see much chance of us getting nearer to any treasure with our clue, and I don't like this business between Miss Ballinger and Slinky and that girl who tried to bribe me."

"You looked quite goofy at her, anyway," Penny said quickly.

"What do you mean? I was just surprised at being offered a motor-bike."

"Well, I've never seen anyone look like that, even at the idea of a motor-bike," she retorted; "but it doesn't matter now. What's more important is that you promised and swore not to say anything to Auntie. You know you did, Jon. It's not like you to back out. Maybe it seems difficult now, but I'm sure we shall find something soon, and remember, too, that old Uncle Charles told you in the letter that your mother wasn't to be worried. We must wait a few days more, Jon. Let's do it on our own."

They crossed yet another dike by the usual plank bridge before he spoke again.

"It's not that I don't want us to do this together, Newpenny. It's just that the whole business looks more serious than we first thought, and if we're not bright enough to find the answer to 'earthen vessels' before these other people, then we shall be to blame for not telling the anybody else especially if there really is a valuable treasure. Don't you see that we ought not to risk losing anything for Mother's sake if we could find it by telling her what we have discovered so far?"

Penny had no immediate answer to this, and Jon looked at her in surprise. Her chin was up and her grey eyes gazed across the levels to the sea. The wind whipped her hair back from her face which, for once, was very serious.

She climbed another fence and sat on the top rail before she said quietly, "I know we ought not to risk anything if it means losing the treasure, but you said yourself that we were a step ahead of the Ballinger gang - I've just thought of that name for them. I think we're quite clever enough to deal

with the old woman, and Slinky, too, if we go on pretending to know nothing. There isn't really anything they can *do* as far as I can see... And besides, Jon, I've made up my mind that we've got to do this without grown-ups. It might make it easier if there were more of us, because I think we ought to be watching Slinky and Miss B. all the time. It's by watching them that we might find out a lot."

Jon looked at her in admiration.

"You mean we might drop them an innocent hint and let them do some of the thinking for us?"

Penny nodded brightly, although she had not really thought as far ahead as that!

"We're nearly there now," Jon went on. "But I'll tell you what we'll try and do presently - when we've had our sandwiches perhaps. We'll go through everything we've discovered so far - I'll write it down if I've got my note-book - and we'll talk it over sensibly and see if we get any nearer that way."

They were close enough now to see that the castle walls, viewed from the outside, were still in fairly good condition and that the building itself was very much bigger than they had imagined. The round, squat central keep did not rise very high above the outer walls, but what struck them most forcibly was the castle's loneliness.

They stood for a moment in the big, grassy space inside the crumbling walls. The sun beat down upon them, and they were sheltered, too, from the breeze. The only sounds were the monotonous baaing of the sheep and the ceaseless song of the larks overhead.

"I wouldn't like to be here at night," Penny said at last. "I wouldn't like it at all. It's all right now with the sun-shine, but I wouldn't like it at night."

"You said that three times. Nobody is going to ask you to come here at night unless you come to watch one of the others, and it was your own idea to get them to work for you, wasn't it?... Now, let's be sensible. The map showed four tracks meeting here, and the path we've just used was one of them.

This must have been a splendid place for a smuggler to hide treasure if he wanted to get rid of it quickly. It would be easy to defend, too, if it were attacked, and I believe there's a good chance that something is hidden here."

For the next hour they explored the walls from the outside. They looked to see if any of the great stones within their reach were loose or whether any showed strange markings or signs. They searched, too, along the ground at the foot of the walls, and once Jon went down on his hands and knees and scraped the sand from a bare patch in the hope that he might find a trap-door.

They found an ideal picnic place inside the castle on the top of a high grassy bank that rose, in one place, to within two feet of a part of the outer wall that faced due south. Here they were almost as high as the sentinels who once would have paced the ramparts on the look-out for invaders. They were sheltered here from the wind that sang among the broken stonework, and Penny flopped down and stretched herself on the sweet-smelling turf which was gay with tiny nodding scabious and little red and yellow blooms of Lady's Slipper.

She sniffed rapturously. "It's lovely!" she sighed.

Jon was already unpacking the haversack. "What's lovely? Can you smell meat pie?"

"No, I didn't mean that. I meant everything. I love the smell of the sea and the Marsh and the sheep. And I love being here in the sunshine and listening to the birds, and I love the *Dolphin* and the fun we're going to have, and today is one of the days when I feel I never want to go back to school again."

"You'd better have something to eat," her cousin said rudely. "You can't be feeling well... As soon as we've finished we'll do as I said and write down all the things we know about the Ballinger and Slinky."

A quarter of an hour later, when they were ready to talk again, Jon brought out his notebook and pencil and began his task.

"I'm going to write down what we're sure of," Jon began. "We don't want to put down queries and what we think *may* have happened... First of all, we know that Slinky and Miss Ballinger and, of course, that girl, are all convinced that there is a treasure to be found either in the *Dolphin* or somewhere near. We know, too, that they have the clue on the scrap of parchment which Great-Uncle Charles left for me, but we don't know whether they have deciphered it. Another thing we're certain of is that they want the map and would go a long way to get hold of it."

"They even sent a messenger after it who made you look goofy!" Penny murmured as she lay on her back with her eyes closed.

Jon continued as if he had not heard the last remark.

"Another thing we're sure of is that Slinky has a duplicate key to our room, and until we get that lock changed he can go in there and nose around whenever we're out."

"He can't unlock the box, anyway," Penny said, "and there's nothing else in that room, is there?"

"If he wanted to see inside the box badly enough I expect he could have another key made... I've only just thought of that, but perhaps we ought to keep the box in my bedroom."

"What I think," Penny went on dreamily, "is that we ought to watch them all, all the time, and sooner or later they'll think of something that we haven't, and then we can nip in first and get the treasure."

"Very practical and helpful!" Jon said. "Thank you very much. Now, there's another thing. We found the letter and the clue in the Bible and that started us off, but I don't think they will even get the same start."

"Just be quiet for a minute, Jon, and listen. There's a sort of hum like you get in a field in summer. It's wizard. Listen."

With a sigh, Jon put his notebook on the grass beside him, lay back and closed his eyes. Perhaps Penny was right. No reason why they shouldn't

take it easy for a few minutes... Sun was lovely, too...

Jon was warm and comfortable, and when he closed his eyes the world slipped away.

Penny was asleep already.

They slept for an hour and in that time several things happened. High up under the walls they could not be seen from outside, and only from inside by someone who came right round the keep and then looked up to their eyrie.

Penny was the first to wake. The sun was still pleasantly hot on her face and glowed pinkly through her eyelids, which for a moment or two she kept blissfully closed. Then she heard a voice which seemed vaguely familiar and sat up in surprise. Kneeling on the turf facing her about two yards away was a boy of about sixteen, who was laughing at her as he put his finger to his lips and nodded towards Jon, who sat up suddenly.

"Sorry to wake you," he whispered. "I didn't realize you were here till I started to climb up. Do you mind? I want to listen to what's going on down below there without being seen... If you want a bit of fun, peep over the top here with me and watch... That funny old thing doesn't know what she's in for!"

Penny looked at the stranger with interest. He seemed to be a very nice boy- brown hair, dark eyes and very white teeth in a tanned face.

Slowly, and very cautiously, the three of them crawled to the edge of the wall, raised their heads and peeped over. Almost directly below them Miss Ballinger was sitting at her easel with her back to the castle walls. She was waving a large paint brush in her right hand and booming in her loud voice at two children who were standing one on each side of her.

"I do not like inquisitive children and I ask you both to go away. And I would like you to go a very long way away and take your objectionable

little dog with you," and with the last words she gestured with the paint brush in the direction of a black Scottie dog which Penny felt certain she had seen before.

It was at once evident that this action of Miss Ballinger's was a mistake, for the dog, which had previously taken a dislike to the large woman, first bowed his head to the ground between his front paws and growled and then leapt upon the paint brush, seized it and pranced triumphantly away. In about five seconds the handle of the paint brush was a tangle of splinters, while the oily end was tossed into the air as if it had been a rat.

"Take the brute away," Miss Ballinger roared as she got off her stool and advanced threateningly towards the dog, who now began to circle round his enemy, barking loudly. "Call him off! He's dangerous! Take him away and yourselves too, you horrible little nuisances."

At the first sight of the two children Penny whistled softly in surprise, and Jon polished his glasses again. They were boy and girl twins about ten years of age and were amazingly alike.

The little girl was speaking now.

"Mackie!" she called. "Come here... *At once, sir.*"

The little dog lowered his triumphant tail and came at once to his mistress, who picked him up and tucked him under her arm. He raised his head and licked her nose affectionately.

"Now we'll tell you something," she went on, turning to Miss Ballinger, who now had the grace to look a little abashed, "an' we'll tell it without being rude. You ought not to speak to a little dog like that. He wasn't doing any harm, was he? Jus' sitting there on the grass watching you painting, like we were..."

"And then you tried to thrash him with a paint brush," the boy broke in.

"Poor little helpless boy," his sister crooned to the dog, whose tail was now wagging furiously behind her. "He only defended himself, didn't he? How

can he know what a paint brush is for? If you'd let him stay by you he would soon learn."

"That's all we wanted really," the boy added. "Just to know how you did it. We're always being told we've got to learn things and we haven't met many artists..."

Miss Ballinger stalked heavily back to her stool. Her face was very red and her mouth was working, but no words seemed to issue from it.

"Oh, joy," Penny murmured. "She's in an awful fury. She'll explode in a minute. Who are those kids, anyway? I've seen the dog somewhere I know."

Jon said, "It's amazing, but even with my glasses on they look exactly alike."

"They are," said the boy between them sadly. "We get muddled ourselves sometimes. Look! Dickie is holding her stool politely while she sits down. I wonder who she is?"

"We can tell you that," Penny replied. "Who are those kids? They look rather fun."

"They always seem funny at first, but I get a bit tired of them... I'm their brother, you see, and I get fed up with it sometimes. Listen! The old dear is off again."

"Very well," Miss Ballinger boomed. "So you tell me how I'm to speak to a dog, do you! You suddenly appear from nowhere and ask impertinent questions, then you stand round and irritate me with more questions, then you set your abominable animal at me and *then* you proceed to lecture me. Now then! *For the last time. Will you go away and leave me in peace?*"

A stifled roar came from Miss Ballinger, and she got up and began to nimble in the capacious bag which Jon and Penny remembered so well. Then:

"Listen to me, my dears," in a very different kind of voice, for she gulped first and then almost cooed. "Do you like ices? It's very hot today and perhaps you would like a big ice each. Now, here's half a crown... Just run along and get yourselves a big tub each... Here you are, my dears."

The twins regarded her coldly.

"No, thank you," said Mary. "We don't care much for ices... Not in the afternoon."

"Not enough to go running back to Rye for, anyway," her twin added ungrammatically.

"And besides," Mary went on, "we're not allowed to take money from strangers."

Miss Ballinger jumped up from her stool and raised both hands above her head.

"*Brats*," she stuttered. "*Disgusting brats! Will you go away?*"

Mary put the dog down.

"Mackie, darling," she said, "don't take any notice of her. She's rude."

"*Rude!*" screamed Miss Ballinger and knocked the easel over.

Dickie politely helped to set it up again, while Mary examined the daubed canvas critically. Miss Ballinger snatched it from her, broke it in half across her knee and flung the pieces away and joyfully the little dog pursued them!

"Get out of my way, both of you," she went on between clenched teeth. "Just get away before I lay my hands on you... Yes, I'm going!"

"Look," Jon whispered. "I think she's foaming at the mouth now. This is grand. I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

Dickie was speaking.

"I'm sorry you've got to go. We really are. I wanted to see how you made a picture out of all those measurings."

"Measurings? What do you mean, boy?" she asked sharply.

"Well," said Dickie innocently. "Mary and me were behind that little tiny hill over there."

"And," Mary went on, "we saw you come along that path and put your tripod thing up there and then get a tape measure and string or something and go crawling along the walls measurin' and writin' things down in a book."

Jon and Penny looked quickly and significantly at each other.

"Yes, that's right," Dickie said. "What did you do it for?"

The noise that Miss Ballinger now made cannot be described in words. Certainly she snorted, and afterwards they agreed that she laughed a sinister laugh, but she did not answer the question. Instead she turned her back on them, picked up the folding stool, put it under her arm and waddled away in the direction of Winchelsea.

"There you are," said David. "That's the end of the Morton Twins' act. You've had it! "

David got to his knees and leaned over the parapet. Instead of calling down to them, he whistled, clear and sweet, the haunting call of the peewit. "Come up here, you two, and meet some new friends," he called, and then turned back to Jon. "You don't mind, do you? I'm afraid we've rather butted in."

"Of course we don't mind," Jon said. "You staying down here?"

Before David could answer, Penny said:

"I know where I've seen that little dog. Didn't you recognize him, Jon? He's at home. At the *Dolphin*! He's the one I spoke to last night when we got in. *I say*..." and she turned on her knees to face David. "You're not, by any

chance, staying at the *Gay Dolphin*, are you? You're not our first visitors, are you?"

"Yes, we are. We came yesterday. We love it - the *Dolphin*, I mean - and I think we'll have a lot of fun round here."

Jon stood up and stretched.

"But this is grand! We live there, you see. It's our new home and it belongs to my mother. This is Penny, my cousin."

"Our name is Morton. We'd rather have gone to Shropshire, but we couldn't manage it this time, and this country is all new to us... Come on, you two... Here, Mackie!"

When David had explained that Penny and Jon actually lived in the *Dolphin*, but were now on holiday too, Mary said, "We don't mind joining up with them, do we, twin? I thought this holiday was going to be dull just with David, but maybe things will happen to us like they did before."

Jon was looking at them critically.

"What do they mean?" he asked. "Anyway, what do they mean about things happening to them?"

"That's all right," David said quickly. "Don't take too much notice of them. They always talk like this, and up in Shropshire we did get mixed up in some fine adventures... We'll tell you about them some day."

Penny liked them all. David she had been sure of from the moment she had wakened. "Thanks for coming to share our adventures," she said. "Let's all stay here while the sun is still shining and have some chocolate."

Mary sat down by Jon and pulled the dog on to her lap, "Thank you very much... Can Mackie have some, too?... He likes chocolate. It nourishes him!"

"Why do you call him Mackie?" Jon asked. "Because he's Scottish?"

"Macbeth is his real name," David explained.

"Why?"

"Lots of people ask that," Mary said. "It's 'cos he murdered sleep when he was tiny... That means he barked a lot and kept our parents awake one night... He didn't like that fat woman, did he, Dickie? He hated her."

"When he hates people it means they're bad," Dickie said. "He's never wrong... Not often, anyway. I didn't care for that woman either and she *was* snooping along and measuring the walls and she didn't like us seeing her. We only came yesterday and I think there's something mysterious going on already."

"Oh, well! What shall we do now?" queried Mary.

"Let's have some tea," Dickie said promptly. "That's what I want more than anything."

"So do I," Penny agreed.

"A good idea," said David, "and I've got a better one. I saw a teashop up by the church this morning. Let's all walk back now and you two come and have tea with us there. Will you? Please do."

"I will if I sit next to Jon," Mary said. "He doesn't like us much yet, but he soon will."

So they tidied up and buried the waste paper and set off together back across the levels and over the dikes to Rye. Once, at one of the narrow bridges, Penny pulled Jon's sleeve till they fell behind the others.

"What do you think of them, Jon? I think they're grand and we ought to ask them to help. You know we want allies."

"That chap David is all right," Jon agreed. "But those kids won't be any good. P'raps he'd join in without them."

"I don't think he would and I think you're wrong about the twins. They've had some adventures. Let's ask them at tea what they did and then I'll leave it to you to decide. But let's join up if we can, Jon! We haven't got much time left and I do want to find this treasure."

Jon nodded and hurried ahead to catch up with the others.

They managed to get a table in the window and the twins caused some consternation among the other customers as they settled down. After ten minutes even Jon thawed and discovered that Mary could not be ignored for long. She was much too entertaining.

"Aren't you going to tell us about those adventures of yours in Shropshire?" he asked.

And the stories they had to tell were worth waiting for and both Jon and Penny listened spellbound.

"It's funny how things have happened to us," David went on. "But they have. I don't see how anything much can happen here, but it's early days yet. Unless," he added as he caught Jon's eye, "you know of anything coming along? Do you?"

Jon looked across at Penny, who nodded slightly. Then he smiled.

"I think there is and I believe you can help us. Of course, we know you'll promise not to say anything to your parents or to anyone, won't you?"

David nodded, Mary smiled and Dickie said, "We swear."

"Well, we think we've got a clue to some treasure hidden by smugglers round Rye and Winchelsea, or even perhaps in the *Dolphin*; and we know that the artist woman you twins were baiting this afternoon is after it too, and she's got accomplices."

David's eyes were bright with excitement.

"Grand," he was saying. "Go on. Tell us more. This is like old times again. Oh, gosh! If only our friend Peter could be here."

"Send a telegram for her," Dickie said. "Stop everything till she comes. And the other members, too. We need them!"

"Members? What members?" Penny asked as David paid the bill and got up to go.

"We've got a secret society of our friends," he said. "That's what Dickie means."

"Well, I wish we were members," Penny said impulsively. "I'd be proud to be a member of that."

David looked at her thoughtfully for a moment but said no more as Jon went on to tell them of the connection between Miss Ballinger and Mr. Grandon and of the girl in the white mackintosh.

They strolled up Trader's Street together, and even the twins were quiet and listened carefully as Jon told them of the maps and of Miss Ballinger's attempts to bribe him.

"Can't you show us?" David pleaded.

"Not out here," Jon said. "But, of course, you can see it some time when nobody else is about... I've just had a grand idea though! Penny and me have a secret room of our own up under the roof at the *Dolphin*. It's our very own and nobody else can get in because I've always got the key with me. Let's all meet there at midnight tonight and I'll show you the map and the other papers, and we'll make some plans."

And so it was agreed that Jon should call David in Room 5 at 11.30 and Penny would do the same for the twins in No. 8 at the same time if she could keep awake.

Then Mr. and Mrs. Morton drove up and Jon just had time to say:

"Better not let anyone know we're all in on this. Silly of us to talk here really, I think. Slinky might see us and that's not very clever. You go in now with your people and we'll call you about eleven-thirty - or earlier, if all is

quiet and everyone has gone to bed. Try not to talk at dinner about us meeting you or else Slinky will hear about it... See you later then... Wear soft soled shoes."

When they had gone Penny said:

"That was fun, Jon. I'm so glad you decided to recruit them. I was *willing* you as hard as I could - I practically prayed - and I'm sure we shall be able to do something with them. Don't you think so?"

Jon nodded. "Maybe. But don't say too much yet. Let me do the explaining tonight. Come on. Time to change, else we'll get into more trouble."

* * * * *

Penny stayed awake until some time after eleven. At last it was time. She had not undressed so the moment the hands of her watch showed 11.30 she reached for her torch, opened her door quietly and stepped on to the creaking stairway. All else was quiet, and as the light was burning in the corridor she switched off her torch. Her journey down the stairs and along the carpeted corridors was rather nervy, but she found No. 8 without difficulty. The door was unlocked, of course, so she turned the handle and slipped in.

Both twins were fast asleep, with their clothes bundled on chairs beside their beds. Quickly she roused them.

They crept out into the lighted corridor and stood stock still when there came a sound of a match being struck somewhere below them. The twins shrank against the wall as Penny whispered under her breath, "Still. Don't move."

Then a board creaked round the next corner and Penny thought, "It's all up now!" and wondered what explanation she could give. Behind her, the twins' eyes were bright and big with excitement, but neither of them moved. For a moment she considered opening the door nearest to her and slipping inside, but before she could decide two shadows slipped round the corner, to be followed by Jon and David!

A suppressed giggle came from Mary and Penny whispered:

"What are you going this way for, you chumps? Buck up! There's someone downstairs!"

"Must have lost my direction," Jon muttered. "Sorry! I remember now. It's the first turn on the left for your stairs, isn't it, Penny?"

She nodded. "Hurry!" she urged. "Do hurry."

When they came to her staircase Jon stopped and whispered, "Lend me your torch, Penny. Mine's nearly out and we must see properly to open the door."

She passed hers along and saw David grin at her as the beam flashed across his face. Behind her the twins twittered with excitement as they climbed the narrow stairs. She closed the door of her room as they passed it and called up to Jon, "I suppose you've got matches for the lamp, Jon."

"There are some on the ledge over the fireplace," he whispered back. "Do you mind if Penny comes in front, David, and holds the torch for me while I unlock the door? She knows the way round here."

So Penny squeezed past and held the torch while Jon fumbled for the big key in the pocket of his dressing-gown. In the background there was a peculiar tap-tapping and Mary whispered:

"It's Dickie's teeth. He's not scared. Only excited. Do buck up there, big Jon, 'cos we're getting worked up behind here."

The beam of the torch focused on the lock as Jon fitted the heavy key and turned it. Penny stepped back as he pulled the door towards them and then swung the beam over his shoulder into the room. It was very dark, for there was no moon. She shone the beam of the torch across to the fireplace to guide Jon to the matches. But as the little yellow spotlight reached the panelled wall at the far end of the room there was an odd click and then Penny screamed and the torch clattered to the floor. For a moment she was so frightened that her knees went weak and she leaned against the door-

post. In the darkness she felt Jon stoop for the torch and then his arm slipped across her shoulders and gave her a clumsy squeeze.

"Did you see her, Jon?" she whispered. "Just her face... against the dark wall... Did you see her, too, Jon?... Tell me you did."

The torch flashed on again and Jon held it steadily so that the beam shone on the wall by the fireplace.

"There's nothing there now," he said shakily. "But I saw that face, too, Penny. It was the Ballinger."

7. Tuesday Night: Trader's Passage

It was Miss Ballinger's face," Jon repeated in a whisper. "A face without a body... but, of course, that's nonsense. It couldn't be!"

"It looked like that," Penny said with a shudder, and then David, on the little landing behind her, broke in sharply:

"What are you two burbling about? Do get out of the way and let us in. Isn't there a light somewhere?"

And from behind him came further plaintive comment. "It's pitchy dark and it's jolly cold and we can't see a thing because of you big ones... Are you frightened of the dark, Jon?"

At that Jon stepped forward, still with the torch shining on the wall, and picked up the matches from the ledge by the fireplace.

"Sorry!" he said. "Come in quickly. Take the torch now, will you, David, and bolt the door on the inside... I'll soon have the lamp alight... Penny! There ought to be some dry wood down there. Try and get a fire going, I'm cold and we might as well be comfortable if we're going to talk."

"You're going to tell us your secret, aren't you?" Mary began, and Dickie said, "This place is fun. Does it belong just to you two?"

Jon nodded, but before he could answer David interrupted again, and Penny could not help thinking that he did certainly know how to manage things!

"I don't think the kids saw it," he said. "But I did. Don't worry, Penny! I'm sure it was real." He turned to the twins. "Did either of you two see a woman's face with big glasses up against the wall here when Jon shone his torch through the door?"

Dickie and Mary glanced meaningly at each other.

"I've explained once," the former began patiently, "that we couldn't see a thing 'cos it was dark..."

"And you great lumps were standing right in the way," Mary continued.

"And how could there be a woman's face there, anyway? Do talk sense, David. There aren't any pictures or a mirror. I s'pose you were just dreaming as usual."

"But Penny looks as if she saw something horrid, twin," Mary said quietly. "*Was* there a face, Penny? We'll believe you - even if it's magic."

Penny, who had now got the fire alight, got up from her knees and faced the boys. She felt better now.

"Yes," she said. "It was Miss Ballinger's face. The woman artist you baited at Camber today. I saw it. Jon saw it and David saw it and if you'd been big enough you'd have seen it too."

"Nowhere she could have hidden, here in the room, is there?" David asked.

"See for yourself," Penny replied. "There's nothing here except our precious tin box and table and chairs."

"Well, I think there's a secret passage behind the fireplace and that rude old Miss What's-her-name heard us coming and was just skipping off when Jon opened the door," Mary announced.

"... And then she slipped into the passage and closed the secret panel and that's how she vanished, just like an old witch," Dickie finished triumphantly.

Jon beamed at them.

"Of course you're right! Don't you think so, Penny? That explains everything, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Jon. I think they're right. It would explain how Slinky got in here on Sunday and stole the clue..."

"Yes, and it explains the footmark in the dirt, too! Now, come on all of you and see if we can find the secret of the panel... Stand there a sec. Penny and I'll go and look from the door and see if that's the right place... Yes, that's it. I'm positive."

"If you're right," David said, "there must be something to push or pull on this side, else she couldn't have got back."

"Unless she left the door open," Penny said as she began to run her fingers up and down the smooth panelling.

The twins went down on their knees and began to search the wainscot as Mary said.

"I wish I knew what all this was about. I just happened to think of this secret passage business 'cos it looks that sort of house. But what I want to know is, why?"

"Why what?"

"Why we're doing all this, you silly ass, Dickie. I mean, I can't see why... You'd better tell us everything, Jon. Just tell us why that painter woman should want to come up to your room... Unless she's living here, of course," she added as a bright afterthought.

Jon, David and Penny were working feverishly now to find some catch or part of the smooth woodwork which would prove to be the key to the panel, and as they searched Jon told them about the clue and "earthen vessels" and of how they were sure that Miss Ballinger had not yet deciphered this.

Mary hissed triumphantly. "I've got the place! Watch me... Watch us, I mean."

They saw her poke her finger into a small round hole where two floorboards reached the panelling of the wall. There came a muffled click and slowly, very slowly, the panel adjoining the fireplace swung outwards into the room, disclosing a dark' cavity within. And as it opened there came, too, a breath of dank, cold air - a smell of fungus and wet wood and decay.

Jon then closed the panel softly to within a quarter of an inch of the latch and beckoned them to the centre of the room.

"Now," he began quietly. "Let's decide quickly what's the best thing to do. We know the way in, so if we like we can go back to bed now and explore this passage properly in the morning. Or we can explore it now, but if we do I think we'd better get at least two more torches, and we'd all better put rubber shoes on if we've got them, because it looks and smells damp in there,"

David said promptly, "Miss What's-her-name may have left a clue now which ought to be followed up at once, and if we wait till morning we may miss it. Let's go while the trail is red hot! Much better. Don't you agree, Penny?"

"David is right. Let's get ready at once and explore while the scent is hot. Golly! My heart is banging with excitement!"

"All right then," Jon agreed. "But we do want another torch. This battery is nearly finished. Who's got one?"

"We have," Mary said. "Sorry we forgot it. I'll go down for it."

"I'll come with you," Dickie said. "But let's be quick."

Jon, who wanted to change his dressing-gown for a sweater, went with them. While they were away Penny crouched on the floor by the open panel and David paced up and down behind her.

"I can't hear anything," she whispered, "but it does smell mouldy. I wish the others would buck up. I say, David, I was jolly glad you suggested that we explored this tonight. I couldn't have slept a wink not knowing... And there's another thing. I'd love to hear some more about that secret society of yours some time... I've always wanted to belong to one. P'raps we could start one here?"

David laughed. "I'll tell you one day, but there's nothing against us having you in if the other members agree... Here they come."

And then, when Jon was bolting the door from the inside he went on:

"I wonder if we ought to do that? You don't mind me suggesting it, do you, but if we go down the passage and for any reason can't get back the same way, we wouldn't be able to get into the room tomorrow by the ordinary way, would we?"

Jon slipped the bolt back quickly. "Thanks," he said, "that's sensible... Now then, I'll turn the lamp low and then we're ready. Who shall go first?"

"You," said David promptly. "It's your passage, anyway. Penny next to you with a spare torch, then the two nuisances and then me in the rear to keep them in order and with the other torch."

This seemed to be sensible, so Jon opened the panel wide and stepped in. His torch showed a narrow stone stairway - leading down to the right at the back of the fireplace. Penny, immediately behind him, took his left hand and he noticed how cold her fingers were. Then David whispered:

"We're all in now. What about the panel? I'd better leave it open, hadn't I?... Bother it! It's closed itself. I wonder if I stepped on something to make it do that...? I can't find the latch that Mary worked from the outside. I can't see a knob, or a handle or anything, and I'm wondering how we're going to get back again."

Jon said over his shoulder. "We're off! Be careful not to slip. These stairs are narrow and steep."

The staircase twisted sharply to the right and Jon stopped suddenly and switched out the torch. Penny blundered heavily against him, but David took the hint and switched off his light as well. The twins stood still and silent, and the blackness was so intense that Penny could almost feel it.

Under his breath, Jon whispered:

"Quiet. I heard voices. Listen."

Penny strained her ears, but she could hear nothing but the thumping of her own heart so, after a little, Jon moved down three more steps and then stopped again.

"Feel the wall on the right," he whispered. "It's wood. The other side is stone, but this side is wood. I bet we're the other side of a panelled room... Now can you hear voices?" and he gripped Penny's fingers so tightly that she nearly cried out with the pain. They stopped again and this time she did hear the murmur of voices quite distinctly, and Dickie said suddenly, "That's our father's voice. 'Course it is. Can you hear him, Mary?"

"Yes, I can, and I don't like hearing him talking down here."

David replied, "Jon's right. We're on the other side of our parents' room... For goodness sake don't make a row... Do the stairs still go down, Jon?"

"There's a straight bit here," Jon whispered. "Then it looks as if it turns and goes down again... Use your torch to look on the ground for clues, will you, David? There might be something."

"There might be clues in the walls, too," Penny whispered. "There's a thousand hiding-places for a treasure in just this little way, Jon."

"I hope the Ballinger hasn't found it, that's all," her cousin said, "but I s'pose we shall soon hear if she has... Come on, Penny. Let's try the next floor."

"And going down," David murmured behind them. Another twist in the staircase and some more steps down, and again Jon stopped. This time they all heard voices and crowded up to him as he put his ear close against the wooden panelling. He pulled Penny's head close to his mouth:

"Listen," he breathed. "Tell them all to listen without a sound. It's Miss B. and Slinky. They're the other side of this panel."

"I tell you it's not safe," they heard Mr. Grandon say. "They are suspicious already and may well have told Mrs. Warrender of their discoveries."

Penny turned to the others:

"I think we're right downstairs now," she whispered, "and this is Slinky's own room. I've never been in it, but I'm sure that's where we are. Listen! She's speaking now."

"There is no more time to waste, my friend," came Miss Ballinger's unmistakable rumble. "And I do not intend to be put off with any more of your futile excuses. I am now confident that those two children have the key to the secret. True, we do not know whether they realize that the 'nt' clue was a clue. I tried the little fools yesterday by suggesting that April date to them, but they just looked stupid..." - and here Penny nudged Jon delightedly. "But listen to me, Grandon. This is no laughing matter. The map, which I am convinced they have, *must be found by you*. Two days I give you, my friend, and if you fail... well, *if you fail* I shall move in here permanently and you can be sure that there will not be room here for you as well. You will disappear promptly then, as you will have failed me... Let there be no squeamishness, my friend, in your methods. The prize is too big for gentility... Find out somehow what these two really know and produce the map for me. I am certain that will help us... It is here or hereabouts, Grandon, and I am sure of that... I am sure, too, that if you had any spirit or enterprise you would have found these papers long ago... It is up to you to find a way to make these children part with the papers. I must rely on you for that."

Grandon sounded sulky when he replied.

"That's easy for you to say. I tell you that I don't like dealing with those children. It's not what I've been used to. Kids! Fancy putting me on to watching kids!"

Here Penny felt the twins shaking with stifled laughter.

"And another thing," Slinky went on. "It's not safe for you to come here at night like this. You know perfectly well that you might be recognized on the way home, even if nobody sees you here... All right! All right! Don't get worked up. How did you get on at the tea party, by the way?"

Miss Ballinger hesitated before saying:

"Most satisfactorily... Now I must go, and not by the front door. Trader's Passage for me, and remember what I have said... I am very serious."

Jon turned round and shone the torch up the stairs again. "Back," he whispered urgently. "As quickly as you can, David. Get out of sight round the corner. Buck up, Penny. Push those kids up in front of you."

Penny had no choice, for he put his hand on her back and forced her up the stairs. David had been quick to realize the position and had already hauled Mary up the winding steps, and Dickie was quick to follow. The rumble of Miss Ballinger's voice came nearer as Jon squeezed round the turn in the stairway and switched off his torch. Penny's hair was tickling his cheek as she said under her breath, "What shall we do if she comes this way?"

"Quiet," he whispered. "See the light. The panel's opening." They crushed themselves back against the stone wall as the thin line of yellow light widened and was then obscured as Miss Ballinger squeezed through the narrow panel into the passage below them.

Then they heard Miss Ballinger say curtly, "Well, good night. Two days, I said. Communicate in the usual way," and then there was a click and they were in velvety darkness again until Miss Ballinger switched on her torch. They all held their breath in an agony of suspense until they heard her heavy footsteps going away from them down the steps.

"We shan't hear any more tonight, anyway," Jon said after a pause, "and we've certainly got something to go on now. Let's we go back to our room, where it's warm, and plan what to do tomorrow. What say you, Penny?"

"Why not hurry now and find out where she's gone and how she got in here? We may never get such a good chance again. What do you think, David?"

"I think Jon is right really, but I'd like to follow her. Come on! We're all in this now, so let's make the best of it. Lead on, Jonathan!"

So they crept past Slinky's door again in single file. There were some more steps down and then the passage widened. Jon stopped and flashed his torch

sideways and upwards, and they saw that on their right was a brick wall and on their left bare earth and stone. The floor was of earth now and so was the roof.

"I guess that we're down to the level of the cellars which are on the other side of this wall," Jon whispered. "Can you smell anything?"

"I can smell a lot of stale, wet things," Mary sniffed, "and I don't like any of them."

"I can smell something burning," Penny said, "and the air is blowing up towards us, isn't it?... Let's go on... Why, Jon! What's that? Flash your torch ahead on the left. Look! It's something hanging from the roof!"

Jon swung the beam up to the roof and they all stared in silence till Penny said:

"I know what it is! Those are the roots of the withy tree that grows through the wall in the garden. I can see it from my window. Now we know where we are... Let's hurry on. I can still smell that burning,"

"That was terrible," murmured Dickie. "Fancy being scared by an old tree," and as they passed he slapped the straggling roots where they came out from the roof.

The passage now ran downhill. It was rough underfoot and the roof was sometimes shored up with planks and supports. In some places the walls were damp.

"We're going downhill fast now," Jon said, "and it's fairly straight... Here's what we smelled burning. Miss B's cigarette-end. It's still alight, so she can't be far ahead. Don't make a row."

The air was fresher now and seemed to be blowing steadily towards them.

"Going uphill again now," Jon said. "Now a turn to the right... Look out, Penny! There are three steps up here... Gosh! I'm out!" and even as he spoke he disappeared. Penny looked up and saw something like branches

outlined against a star-spangled sky, and then Jon's hand came down to her and pulled her into the open. When they were all out they realized that they were on a patch of waste ground behind some fishermen's huts standing above the road and the river. The feathery branches of the tamarisks were stirring gently and a great moon sailed serenely over the walls of Rye, which towered up behind them. David's hand came down hard on Penny's shoulder.

"Isn't that what we're looking for?" he said quietly, pointing with the other hand down to the river. Penny wriggled free and stood up. Unmistakable in the clear moonlight, the stumpy figure of Miss Ballinger was crossing the old wooden bridge. In the stillness the sound of her footsteps came faintly to them. Then they heard the whine of a car's self-starter, heard the engine burst into life, heard the gear change and the throbbing gradually die away in the distance.

"So that's how she does it," Penny said. "We've found out a lot tonight, but we haven't found the treasure."

"You see, don't you?" Jon was explaining to anyone who would listen. "You see that the way we've come was the smugglers' secret way up into the town. That's why the *Dolphin* was marked on the map, and that's why the steps are called 'Trader's Passage'. Smugglers used to be called Freetraders. I bet our secret passage runs under the steps all the way."

"This entrance is well hidden, too," David said. "We must be careful not to leave any signs outside here... Now, I suppose we'd better go back... Which way? Outside or inside?"

"Inside, of course," the twins protested.

They pulled the tamarisk branches over the entrance again and made their way quickly up the passage. When they had all reached the top step safely they remembered that the panel had closed behind David, who had not been able to reopen it.

"That was unintelligent of me," he admitted, "and it was stupid to forget it before we came up again... Shine the torch somebody and let me see if I can

find the latch which will do the trick."

But he was unsuccessful. Both torches began to dim; and Penny was worried as they searched and fumbled for the secret catch.

"Trouble is," Jon said, "that the catch seems to work from the inside and that hole we found is lower on that side than it is on this, and that's why we can't get at it here... The only way to find it would be to heave up these floorboards, and I s'pose nobody has got a strong knife?"

Nobody had, and Jon sat back on his heels in despair. Then one torch flickered and went out and Mary said:

"I'm not very keen on this. Shall we go right down the passage again and then come up the steps outside and knock at the front door? We're tired now, aren't we, twin?"

"I don't know about you chaps," Dickie yawned, "but I'm going down to wake up Slinky. He'll just have to let us through his room. If he tries to be funny, I'll just fix him... Come on. Mary and me are tired, and it's all because David hasn't been clever with this secret door... But he *would* do it himself!"

"Don't be crazy, Dickie," David said. "And don't show off. You know perfectly well that we can't go and wake him up. He'd give the whole game away and that would be the end of everything for us... Golly! This torch is going now. I'll switch it off while we talk."

"We've got to do something, anyway," Penny replied. " We can't sit here all night in the dark."

"There are three things we can do," Jon said. "We can stay here in the cold, we can walk back as Mary suggested and try to get into the *Dolphin* without waking anybody, or do what Dickie says - and I think the last suggestion is the best."

"All right," David said. "Maybe it's the best idea - and he might give himself away somehow. Just enough in the torch to get us down to his

room, I think, and if he does give the game away we shan't be any worse off than if we have to wake somebody up from the front. Let's try him and let Penny do her act."

So this time Penny led the way down until they reached Mr. Grandon's room. She listened carefully at the panel and whispered, "There's no sound. I think the nasty little man must be asleep... Here goes," and she rapped sharply on the panel three times. She repeated this signal twice and then whispered, "I heard a click. He's put the light on. Now listen to me," and in a very creditable imitation of Miss Ballinger she went on, "Open quickly! Urgent! I have lost my light and cannot find the catch. Are you there? Open quickly. Do not keep me waiting."

There was a startled gasp from the other side of the panelling.

"Why have you come back? Go away. It's not safe."

Penny took a deep breath and tried again.

"Do as I say," she rumbled. "Open up and do not argue."

"Very well, but be quick, I beg you," Grandon gasped, and Penny found herself pushed into the background with the twins while Jon and David took her place in front of the panel which suddenly swung open. For a moment they were all dazzled by the light, and then the two boys jumped down into the room. Grandon, now in scarlet pyjamas and a brilliant patterned dressing-gown, started back in astonishment. His mouth fell open, and when Penny turned to help the twins he stuttered with rage.

"Please don't make a noise, Mr. Grandon. We got lost in there and we want to get off to bed right away. Let us out through your room, please, and we're sorry we got you out of bed."

The man gulped and put his hand to his throat. Penny, watching him curiously, saw the veins swell on his forehead.

"What do you mean?" he gasped in a strangled voice. "How did you get here? What's in there? A passage? I suppose this is all a trick just to wake

me up and annoy me. Tell me quickly. Is that a passage?"

Nobody answered him, and Penny even felt sorry for him. Jon led the way across the room and David followed as Mr. Grandon spoke again.

"I do not know the meaning of this astonishing escapade, but I shall most certainly inform Mrs. Warrender in the morning - and Mr. and Mrs. Morton also," he added after a quick look at David and the twins.

"I wouldn't tell *anybody*," Jon said steadily. "I honestly don't think you should. I hope you will believe what I say, Mr. Grandon. Much better for you to say absolutely nothing to absolutely nobody."

Slinky was standing now between them and the door. His lips were shaking, but Penny did not like the look in his eyes, for they were blazing with hatred as Dickie said:

"If you didn't know there was a passage there, why did you open the panel for us?"

"I shall most certainly inform your parents in the morning," he said quietly. "Now get out! All of you!"

Jon looked him up and down coolly as he passed and said, "I wouldn't tell anybody if I were you, Mr. Grandon. It would be very unwise. We were all in the passage there some time tonight and have heard a lot - information of the very greatest value to us... Good night, Mr. Grandon, and thank you."

8. Wednesday: Roman's Isle

Jenny was too bewildered and frightened to know where she was. Her heart was thudding against her ribs and she realized that she was half out of bed with her head hanging over the edge. The hand that she had felt so unmistakably in her dream was still holding her shoulder, but a voice she knew and loved was saying:

"Penny! Darling, what is it? What's the matter? Why did you shout like that for Jon?"

Penny rolled over, sat up in bed and hugged her aunt.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "Did I really shout for Jon? You won't ever tell him, will you, Auntie? Promise you won't... Darling, it was terrible! I had a nightmare... I was being chased down the passage by Sl...! Well, I was being chased, anyway. You know how *awful* it is, don't you?"

Mrs. Warrender sat on the bed and pushed back Penny's tousled hair and looked gravely into her grey eyes.

"You've no business to be having nightmares like that, Penny. Are you sure you feel well? You look tired. Do you know the time? It's nearly nine, and I've had to wake Jon, too, for he was dead to the world... What have you two been doing?" she added suspiciously.

"Nothing, darling," Penny said quickly, clasping her knees. "At least that's not quite true. Nothing that we can tell you about now, so please don't ask me yet... You won't ask us, will you?... And I'm so sorry we're so late. I was tired yesterday, but I can't think why Jon should be!"

"Can't you?" Mrs. Warrender asked quietly. "How odd. I think I must talk to Jon again. Be as quick as you can now, because I'm keeping your breakfast hot.

Penny put her face right under cold water twice to try and wake herself properly, but she yawned several times while she was dressing and did not

feel very fresh when she went down to breakfast. She did hope that Jon would be there first, because she was not looking forward to a further conversation alone with her aunt, who seemed to be getting rather suspicious. It was silly of him not to wake up at the proper time. If they went on making mistakes like this they would spoil everything!

Then she remembered Slinky's threat to tell Mrs. Warrender and Mrs. Morton about last night's adventure. Perhaps he had already done this and that was why her aunt had seemed so quiet and suspicious just now? And yet it did not seem likely that he would risk doing such a stupid thing merely out of spite, particularly as he must have been certain that Jon would betray him if forced to do so.

She paused outside her aunt's sitting-room and listened hopefully. Jon was down, for she could hear his voice raised rather querulously, and as Penny recognized this sign she was certain that unless he was supported he was in the mood to give everything away!

By the time Penny sat down at the table Jon had started to say:

"Mother, I think perhaps we ought to tell you..." And then two things happened. First, Penny kicked out under the table in the hope of reaching her cousin, and then there was a knock at the door and Mr. Grandon came in. He looked more sallow than usual this morning and his black eyes flickered quickly from Jon to Penny as he said quietly to Mrs. Warrender:

"Excuse me. The telephone. They insist upon speaking to you and say it is urgent... I am so sorry. I did not know that you were still at breakfast..." He held the door open for her then, when she had gone out, he turned to Jon and Penny and put his finger to his lips.

As soon as he had closed the door Penny opened her mouth to speak, but Jon whispered:

"Quiet for a minute. He may be listening outside."

Penny tip-toed to the door and put her mouth to the keyhole, took a deep breath and blew through it!

"If he's there now that'll give him earache!" she announced with great satisfaction, then turned like a fury on her cousin.

"Now then," she went on, "you were going to give in, weren't you? You were just going to tell her, and I bet Slinky was listening outside then and invented the telephone so that you would be interrupted. It's too bad of you, Jon! You know you promised you wouldn't tell her."

"Look here, Penny," Jon said, "this is all very well, but I think this business has got too serious for us and that Mother ought to know that this beastly man Slinky is an accomplice of Miss Ballinger's. She ought to know, too, that this proves there is a treasure and that they tried to bribe me with a motor-bike..."

"Jon! You know you promised that we would do this without the grown-ups, and now we've got the Mortons to help there's no need to be afraid of anybody. We'll find the treasure without grown-ups. I know we will."

But Jon just shook his head obstinately.

"You're afraid!" Penny taunted. "That's what it is! You're scared about the whole business... I tell you what I'm going to do! I'm going to find David and tell him that even if you back out now I'll stand by him and help him to find the treasure in spite of anything the others can do with your help... It's no use you looking mad and getting red in the face and spluttering... I know very well that David would see this through on his own. He's not the sort to go to grown-ups, and I never thought you were until the last day or two!"

Jon was furiously angry. He was not used to this sort of taunt from Penny. He did not like it at all, and was still trying to find a dignified and suitable retort when Mrs. Warrender returned.

"Odd about the telephone," she said. "When I got there the caller had rung off. What's the matter with you, Jon? You look red. Never mind! Don't tell me... By the way, I've got a special message for you."

"Me, too?" asked Penny.

"No, it's not for you; it's for Jon. You weren't mentioned, Penny. I've just seen Mr. Morton in the lounge, Jon, and he tells me that you have already met his family."

"Yes," Penny broke in. "Yes, Auntie, we did meet them, but we didn't know who they were at the time. They're nice, and I think we shall be friends."

"Well," Mrs. Warrender went on, "you know I didn't really want this to happen, but they seem to like you, too, so I suppose it's all right... Anyway, Jon, Mr. Morton asked me to ask you whether you would like to go with them to the golf links this morning - his boy David is going, too - and stay to lunch with them at the club-house? Mr. and Mrs. Morton are both keen on golf, and I think they want you two boys to caddy for them. It's nice of them to ask you, so I should go if you're not too tired!"

"And what about me?" Penny asked plaintively.

"I'll think of something," her aunt said quite grimly for once, and Penny had the grace to grin sheepishly at Jon across the table.

"I'm not interested in walking round with a sack of golf clubs on my back, anyway," she said. "Have a good time, Jon, and I'll see you this afternoon, I expect... unless I decide to do something on my own."

Soon after this Mrs. Warrender left them, and when the door had closed they both started to talk at once.

"I'm sorry I got into such a rage about telling your mother," Penny began, and Jon said:

"Do you think Slinky really was listening outside the door?... Oh, that's all right, Penny... It's just that this business is getting me down a bit, I s'pose... We'll give it a little longer. Keep your eyes open here and watch Slinky particularly, and David and me will have a talk about last night and see if we can get any more brain-waves."

Later, when Jon went out into the lounge, the twins introduced him to their father.

Jon liked Mr. Morton at once. He liked them all, and when they went out into the sunshine together he realized that he was going to enjoy the day, but he had no idea how exciting it was going to be.

David was just driving the car under the archway into the street with Vasson beside him, so they followed him out.

Penny was sitting on the wall swinging her legs, and Mrs. Morton went over to her.

"You must be Penny," she smiled. "I've heard a lot about you already. You and Jonathan must come out with us for the day soon. We'll make up a party. And if you've nothing better to do today, my dear, just keep an eye on those awful twins of mine, will you? All right! All right! I'm coming! Thank you, Vasson. What a lovely day!"

"Best get your game in quick," Vasson replied as he closed the car door and stood back. "Wind's rising and weather's breaking up. Moon's full tonight and tide be highest of the year."

At the golf course David showed Jon how to carry a bag of golf clubs comfortably across his shoulders, then they all tramped across the springy turf and over the dunes. Before long the wind freshened and the sun disappeared behind the clouds which were piling up from the southwest. The colour of the sea changed to dark green, and far out across the sands the tumbling waves were flecked with white foam, and by the time they were back at the club-house the first silver spears of rain came driving sharply at them from the sea.

"Vasson was right, then," Mr. Morton said as they went in. "Doesn't look as if we shall get much more golf today. How quickly the weather changes down here."

The meal was good and the boys were hungry, but they both felt sleepy by the time the coffee arrived. Jon was almost nodding when he realized that Mr. Morton was talking about the Marsh.

"We've read a lot of the smuggling stories," Jon said. "Didn't the Romans land on the Marsh? Do you know any stories about them, sir?"

"Yes, Jon, there's no doubt about that. Roman remains have been found in the Marsh, I believe, and many of them in this district. A mound in flat country like this is conspicuous, and somebody told me that many of these odd-looking hillocks have already been opened by experts."

"What do they find?" David asked. "Bones?"

"Yes, bones and old Roman coins and fragments of pottery."

Fragments of pottery! Pottery made of clay! Earthen vessels!

"But, sir," Jon said as quietly as possible, as he polished his glasses, "can you tell me what sort of pottery would be in these old graves? Would they put their gold in them?"

Mr. Morton laughed. "You sound very keen! I'm not an expert on this, but I think they did bury gold in pottery jars with their dead."

"I suppose that lots of these little hills and ridges round here might be Roman forts or burial places?" Jon persisted and winked hard at David, who seemed at last to realize that these questions meant something.

A sudden gust of wind shook the windows as Mrs. Morton finished her coffee.

"I'm sorry about the weather. What are you boys going to do? We're going to stay on here for a while and play cards. Would you like to wait for us or go home on your own before it gets too bad? There's a bus, I believe."

Jon nudged David and said, "I think I ought to get back home, thanks all the same. Penny is on her own, you see, and I might be able to help my mother."

"I'll go back with you, Jon," David added, taking up his cue quickly.

Outside, when they left the shelter of the club-house, the force of the wind nearly lifted them off their feet. The rain had stopped now, but behind the roar and worry of the gale they could hear the angry muttering of the sea.

"Let's climb to the top of the dunes," David panted as they leaned against the wind. "It'll be grand up there, and you can tell me what's happened. Have you had a brainwave?"

They struggled forward in silence until, behind the shelter of the dunes, they could speak without shouting.

"Of course it's a brainwave," Jon said. "I know what earthen vessels are now. I bet the treasure is buried somewhere in one of those old Roman vases your father was telling us about."

They pulled themselves further up the bank of slippery sand by clutching tufts of grass, while the wind roared over their heads. Once on the top, though, they were exposed to its full fury and they flung themselves down full length in the grass. Jon raised his head to look out to sea and felt the sting of flying sand on his face.

"I've never been in a wind like this," he gasped. "Put up your hand and feel the sand. It's coming in like rain - and look at the sea, David."

The tide was on the turn and big, angry crested waves were racing in over the flat sands. The horizon was a bright, clear strip of light above the brown sea, but dark clouds filled the rest of the sky. The world was full of wind. They were alone in a world of roaring and booming, a world in which the wind seemed a live and tangible thing as it whipped the sea into a fury, whirled microscopic grains of sand from the beach and whistled through the grass that was levelled round their heads. A few gulls wheeled and hovered against the force of the wind, while their plaintive mewing was tossed inland and lost in the tumult of the gale.

"That chap Vasson knows how to read the weather," David gasped. "Do you think we'd better get back to the *Dolphin*?"

"Yes, I do. I think we ought to look at the map again and check up on the hills which it shows. Come to think of it, David, Camber Castle is on a mound and we caught Miss Ballinger messing about round there. Then, the two windmills are built on mounds and both of those were marked on the map. And there's a gibbet on a little hill round here somewhere. Penny wants to explore that and - I've got it, I believe! There's one little hill marked specially and that's on Winchelsea beach just by those bungalows where the Ballinger lives!"

"Maybe you've got something there," David agreed. "Let's get back and rout out the others and see if there's anything we can do today... I hope it won't rain again, though."

"If it does," Jon replied, "we can all go up to our room and have a fire and make some plans for exploring all these mounds properly. Come on! Let's try for the bus," and they scrambled down from the dunes and were almost blown off their feet as they made for the road on the other side of the club-house.

The bus put them down by the river, and as they climbed the steps of Trader's Passage another scurry of rain rushed over the levels and lashed the sturdy walls of Rye that had stood fast and firm against so many gales.

Vasson was standing under the archway looking out to sea and nodded when he saw the boys.

"You were right about the weather, Fred," Jon remarked as he wiped the raindrops from his glasses. "I've never been in a gale like this before."

The porter shook his head. "Nor never may again," he muttered. "I've seen but two more like this and each time there's been trouble. And there'll be trouble tonight, I'm thinking. Now look," he said, pointing in the direction of Winchelsea beach. "That's where the levels seem to be lowest - back there behind those pink boxes they calls bungalows - and it's just along there from Cliff End to Camber where the bank is weakest."

"Do you mean the high bank that keeps the sea back?" Jon said.

"I mean the bank wot's meant to keep the sea back," Vasson said gravely. " 'Tis nobody's business to see to it seemingly, and if once it goes - and go she might in weather like this with the tide at the full - there's nothing to save thousands of acres of best grazing in the country and nothing to stop the sea coming up here again."

"But has the big bank ever broken there?" Jon asked.

"Once. But tide was on turn and some chaps were ready to fill up the gap and not much harm done - but there'll be plenty watching there afore long. I be going myself later if missus 'ull give me leave. Some of us are allus on call for this trouble."

"Could we come with you?" David asked. "Could we? We'd be jolly useful."

Vasson shook his head. "I would'na risk takin' you."

Jon found his mother in her sitting-room.

"Hello," she said. "Have you had a good time, and did they get their game in before the gale?"

Jon answered her questions then asked where Penny was.

"Penny? Didn't I tell you? She's gone to Hastings in the car with the twins and Mr. Grandon."

"*Mr. Grandon?*" Jon nearly shouted.

"Yes. And why not? I thought it was rather decent of him. I'm not sure whether I was right to let those twins go, too, but they wanted to go and I didn't think Mrs. Morton would mind. It seemed a shame for them to miss the fun."

"Fun?" Jon gasped as he sat down on the nearest chair. "What fun? Why have they gone?"

"Don't be stupid, Jon. I keep telling you. Mr. Grandon had to go in on business today, and as Penny was mooching about all over the house after you'd gone and looking particularly gloomy, he asked me whether he could take her and the twins with him. I thought she was a bit stupid about it at first, but the twins were very keen and as Penny said she'd promised Mrs. Morton to keep an eye on them, she went off cheerfully enough in the end. And that reminds me that she was very anxious for me to tell you where they'd gone for some reason or other... Now are you satisfied? Why are you looking so worried, Jon? They can't come to any harm, and anyway they'll be home at any minute, I should think. They were having lunch in the town and said they would be back for tea... Now where are you going?"

"Only to find David," Jon said as he made for the door. "I'll be back soon, Mother... Don't worry. I'm not worried. Only surprised!"

David looked up eagerly from his chair by the wood fire in the lounge, but before he could speak Jon had told him the news.

"Now, why on earth has she gone trailing in there with him for the day?" he finished breathlessly.

At that moment the telephone began to ring.

"*Gay Dolphin*, Rye," Jon announced, feeling rather bored.

"Oh! May I speak to Mr. Jonathan Warrender, please," came pleasantly over the wire in a voice Jon seemed to recognize.

"Jonathan Warrender speaking," he said, feeling himself go rather red in the face.

"Isn't that lucky," the girl said. "How are you, Jonathan? You know who it is speaking, don't you?"

"You're Miss Ballinger's niece, aren't you?" he muttered rather ungraciously.

"That's right! But listen, Jon. I'm really speaking for your cousin, Penny - and for us all, too, of course - but specially for Penny. Can you and your friend come over here right away and have tea with us? The twins are here, too, but your cousin says you must come because she's got important news..." and here the girl laughed musically... "news about some treasure or something equally exciting. I know it's a rotten day, Jon, but it's not raining now, and if you come I'll pick you up on the road as I've got the car."

"Where's Penny?" Jon asked suspiciously. "She's all right, isn't she?"

"Of *course* she's all right. She's at the bungalow helping my aunt to get the tea, and she asked me to come up to the call box to phone. 'Tell him to come over at once with David Morton' she said, 'and tell him that they must come, and be sure to bring the maps and papers. Tell him it's important' was the last thing she said... Oh, no it wasn't! There was something else that seemed mad to me, but I s'pose you'll understand... Something about a date... April something or other... but I say, you *will* come, won't you, Jon... I'd like to see you again..."

"Very well," Jon said slowly. "Thank you very much. We'll come as soon as we can. We'll be on the road in about ten minutes. 'Bye," and he walked away from the telephone looking very worried.

9. Wednesday: Penny and the Twins in Trouble

Jenny sat swinging her legs on the wall at the end of Trader's Street and watched the car containing the Mortons and Jon disappear round the corner. A steady wind from the sea behind her ruffled her hair and she stifled a yawn and waved to Vasson, who smiled at her as he went back under the archway.

The wall began to feel uncomfortably hard. She jumped down and, frowning, she strolled under the archway and met the twins and Macbeth coming out into the sunshine.

"Hello, Penny! What shall we do?" Dickie began.

Before Penny could answer, her aunt's door opened and Mr. Grandon came out.

"And what are you going to do this lovely morning, Miss Penny?" he smiled, showing his teeth under the little black moustache. "You are going out exploring?... It will be a beautiful morning, I think... You will all be better out of doors, perhaps?"

Penny shook her head as she met his eyes bravely. "You can't frighten us, Mr. Grandon, and we don't know yet what we're going to do."

"And we wouldn't tell you if we did know," Dickie added rather rudely.

Mr. Grandon laughed at this. "I will try and think of something for you all to do today... It will never do for you to get into mischief... Mrs. Warrender would not like that, I know," and before either of them could answer the door closed softly and they were alone.

Penny was still flushed and frowning when Mary said:

"What a beastly beast, Penny! I think he wants us out of the way."

"D'you think he's going to search our room - your room, I mean?" Dickie said.

"I don't know," Penny answered slowly. "He was foul, wasn't he? I felt a bit scared of him when he threatened us like that. I think he does want us out of the way so that's a very good reason for us to stay at home... Come over here, you two, and I'll tell you something.

"Before Jon went he asked me to watch Slinky, and somehow we've got to do it. He may try to get us out of the way, but we've got to be sure he doesn't go prowling about upstairs.

"The best thing to do," Penny suggested, "is for you two to hang about the hotel and keep an eye on him while I guard the room. I think I'll stretch some black cotton across the secret panel and the door, too, and then we'll know if anyone goes in while we're away."

Before they parted she rummaged about amongst the rubbish on the bench at the back of Vasson's room and found some pins and a reel of black cotton. Then they all went back into the hotel and Penny waited on the stairs while Dickie crept up the passage which led to Mr. Grandon's office.

Penny went up the narrow stairs past her own room and unlocked the big door. It swung slowly back with a slight squeak and she stepped into the room. She wondered whether the catch that worked the secret panel still worked, so, after bolting the big door behind her, she crossed the floor and put her finger into the little hole in the wainscot. She felt the catch and pressed it and the panel opened to let in a gust of cold, dank air. She shuddered and stepped into the narrow passage after making sure the panel would not swing back and imprison her.

There was enough light for her to press a pin about nine inches above the ground into each wall and then stretch a length of black cotton taut between the two so that anyone stepping, however cautiously, up the passage could not avoid breaking the thread or pulling out the pins. After closing the panel she fixed another thread trap across the inside wall and then repeated the same trick across the little landing at the top of the stairs. There did not

seem much else that she could do up here, so she locked the door again, hid the key in her room and went down.

In the long corridor she ran into Mrs. Warrender.

"What are you wandering about up here for, Penny?" she said brightly. "I was hoping to find you because I want you to go down to the High Street for me. It won't take you more than a quarter of an hour. You don't mind, do you?"

The note was soon written and Penny went out determined to get back as soon as possible. As she ran down Trader's Passage she noticed how the wind was rising, for here, on the edge of the town facing the levels, there was nothing to break its force as it came blustering in from the sea.

She had to wait a few minutes for an answer to the note and was back at the *Dolphin* again within half an hour.

"Thank you, Penny," Mrs. Warrender said. "I've got a surprise for you. Mr. Grandon has offered to take you and those Morton twins into Hastings in the car. He has to go into the town, and as you seemed to be rather at a loose end, he thought you might like to go, and as he has included the twins very specially in the invitation, I've taken the risk of accepting for them. I don't think Mr. and Mrs. Morton would mind, do you?"

Penny gasped. "He *asked* us to go with him, Auntie? Are you sure he suggested it?"

"Of course I'm sure. He came over specially to ask me and has offered to take you all out to lunch."

Penny just did not know what to say or do.

"You don't seem very keen to go, Penny. Why are you looking so worried? I thought you'd like the chance of the trip. You haven't got to be with him all the time, you know. After lunch you three can arrange to go off on your own and meet him later. He says he wants to be back at tea-time."

"Do the twins know, Auntie? What do they think of the idea?"

"They're thrilled about it! I heard the boy say he'd been looking forward to spending the day with Grandon and that it would be wizard to go with him. I think they're getting the car out now, so you'd better go and get ready."

"All right, Auntie. Thank you. I can't say I like the little man very much, but it will be fun to explore Hastings! Will you tell Jon *directly* he comes back where we've gone?" Penny pleaded. "Please do that, because it's most important. Promise?"

"I promise, but I don't suppose he'll notice that you're not here, Penny!"

"Will you tell him, anyway, please? You will, won't you?" and with that Penny ran upstairs to change.

When she came down the car was in the yard with the twins in the back seat. Mary had Macbeth on her lap. Mr. Grandon was not to be seen.

Mary looked anxiously at Penny. "We did right, didn't we, Penny? He said he was asking you as well, and if we go with him we're doing what we promised, aren't we? I mean we're still doggin' him, and even if we do lose him in Hastings, he can't do much diggin' for treasure there, can he?... You do look worried, Penny... I wish you wouldn't."

Before she could answer Mr. Grandon came out. He was now wearing a most beautiful light grey suit and his teeth and his black hair looked shinier than ever.

"Ah! Miss Penny is ready," he began. "I am so glad you are honouring me with your company. I had to go to Hastings today, and Mrs. Warrender was so good as to give her permission."

As they crawled down the narrow street by the church Mr. Grandon broke an awkward silence.

"Which way did you come with Vasson? There are two good roads to Hastings and we will go now the way that is fresh to you."

"We came through Winchelsea," Penny said shortly.

Mr. Grandon flashed his teeth at her. "No need to be sulky," he said, too quietly for the twins to hear. "Let us all have a holiday today. A truce, shall we call it? Let us enjoy ourselves."

They went through several lovely little villages, Mr.

Grandon chatting pleasantly the while and making rather feeble jokes as well, until, in spite of her suspicions, Penny found herself answering, and laughing with him, too.

Mr. Grandon burst into song and bent forward over the wheel as if he was in a racing car, so she leaned back and hoped for the best.

Penny was still wondering what the real purpose of the invitation could be and trying to make some sense out of his extraordinary mood, when he pointed ahead and said seriously:

"Perhaps you would like to walk along the Parade to the pier," Slinky went on. "I will meet you there in half an hour, and please don't be late, as I have much to do later," and almost before they were on the pavement he had let in the clutch and glided away.

"Well!" said the twins together, "What do you think of that?"

Penny shook her head. "I don't know what to think. Everything is upside down. If we didn't know what we do know about him we'd think he was quite decent!... I say, something has happened to the weather. It's going to rain like fun in a moment, and the wind is worse than ever... Let's cross over and look at the sea."

The tide was low, but the waves were racing in over the sands and breaking in fury over the rocks. Storm clouds filled the western sky and the force of the wind seemed to grow every minute as they leaned over the rails and watched the seagulls twist and turn over the deserted beach. Then came the first sharp stinging raindrops.

They noticed that under the Parade on which they were standing was another covered walk open to the sea and that they could reach the pier this way in shelter. Dickie was fascinated by the concrete walls of this underground parade, which were studded with the coloured fragments of broken glass bottles and china.

Mr. Grandon was waiting for them as he had promised in a shelter by the pier. He had no raincoat and looked rather miserable and cold in his smart grey suit.

"I have parked the car," he said. "Let us go and eat."

Mr. Grandon had obviously made arrangements for their reception and they were able to settle down at a nice table in the window.

Dickie looked doubtfully at the menu thrust into his hand by an efficient waiter and their host was just saying:

"Perhaps you will leave it to me to order for you. I know what you like, you see," when his elbow was jogged by a large woman who was making her way to the next table and he dropped the card. He stooped to pick it up, while Penny gasped audibly as Miss Ballinger sat down within four feet of them.

At that Miss Ballinger turned and recognized Penny. Her ugly, bespectacled face broke into a smile of welcome as she got up and waddled over to them.

"But what a pleasant surprise, my dear!" she boomed. "Have you come to search the antique shops here for me? And where is your cousin, Jonathan? I seem to remember these children. And this gentleman? Perhaps you will introduce me?"

Miss Ballinger's pretence of not knowing her own accomplice rendered Penny speechless, until suddenly she realized that Miss Ballinger was not aware that the children knew of the connection between them!

"I am so sorry, Miss Ballinger. This is Mr. Grandon, who manages the *Dolphin* for my aunt and who kindly brought us along in the car for a few

hours. Mr. Grandon, this is Miss Ballinger, whom we met on the train and at Winchelsea. But perhaps you know her?"

Grandon shook his head and then bowed gracefully.

"I have not that pleasure," he smiled. "How do you do, madam?"

Miss Ballingers spoke. "This is fun, isn't it!" - and here Penny felt Dickie step gently on her foot under the table - "I wonder if you would all have pity on a lonely old woman who was going to have her lunch alone and come and join me? Would you? I should be so glad of your company."

Then, before Penny could make any further protest, the waiter appeared again and they soon found themselves seated round a larger table with their new hostess, who had her back to the window. She gave them a very good meal - a meal so unusual and so satisfying that even Dickie was reduced to silence. Penny was too worried to say much, but she did notice that Slinky kept very quiet and this, of course, was in keeping with the part they now knew he had to play with Miss Ballinger.

It was while the grown-ups were having their coffee, however, that Penny noticed the weather. From where she was sitting she could see the Parade and part of the beach, but for the last hour she had been too busy listening to Miss Ballinger and keeping a guard on her own tongue to realize that what had seemed to be a storm was now a raging gale.

"We shan't be able to bathe now," she said to Mary regretfully.

"I've got a better idea," Miss Ballinger broke in. "The weather's too bad to do anything out of doors and I've done all my shopping. If Mr. Grandon would give me a lift home I should be very grateful and then, perhaps, you would all come and have tea with me and finish off the day nicely."

Mr. Grandon murmured a polite acceptance - just a little too quickly it seemed - and the twins looked rather at a loss. But by now Penny's mood had changed. Perhaps it was the good lunch, but although she was sure that this meeting had been arranged, she no longer felt afraid. If they thought

that they could bully Penny Warrender they were mistaken, and perhaps this would be a chance for her to solve the mystery on her own.

If she was clever she might find out more than Miss Ballinger realized and, in any case, no real harm could come to them. Miss Ballinger would not dare to hurt them and the meeting was not likely to be more than a battle of wits, so she turned to their hostess and thanked her as charmingly and naturally as she knew.

"Of course we will give you a lift home, Miss Ballinger. I know my aunt would be very cross with us if we did not help you after your kindness. But I don't think really that we ought to stay to tea, because four extra is a lot..."

"Nonsense, my dear! Nonsense! I'd like you all to come and, as it is nearly three o'clock, perhaps we had better start now, if Mr. Grandon is not inconvenienced... We will be in the hall in ten minutes, Mr. Grandon, if you will have the car ready."

And Mr. Grandon took these orders as a matter of course and, after making his usual little low bow, walked quickly out of the restaurant, leaving Miss Ballinger to pay the bill.

Penny had to squeeze into the back seat between the twins as Miss Ballinger chose to sit in the front.

"Is it all right, Penny?" Mary whispered. "Ought we to go?"

"Just follow my lead," Penny said under her breath, "and we'll beat them yet. I think they've found out something else and I want to know what it is."

Just before they turned away from the sea up through the old fishing town, they noticed a throng of people on the shingle round a big shed, and Mary, who could never resist a crowd, begged Mr. Grandon to stop for a minute.

"Be quick then," Miss Ballinger agreed, "and if it's somebody drowned come back at once."

Penny jumped out also, and as they scrambled over the shingle with heads down against the wind, Dickie took one arm and Mary the other.

"I only said that so that we could plot together if we had to," the latter said. "Although I do want to know what these people are looking at."

A specially fierce gust flung some stinging sand in their faces and Dickie had to yell to make himself heard above the roar of the wind and the crash of the waves on the shingle.

"Why does she want us to go to tea?" he shouted. "I thought she hated us. I b'lieve she still does really."

Mary pulled down Penny's head to her mouth.

"I'm sure she does, too. I don't like the way she looks at us even when she's smiling."

This was a very shrewd remark and Penny had seen this look more than once at lunch time.

"When we get to a phone box we'll ring up the *Dolphin* and I'll tell Jon where we are and where we're going, but don't you worry, twins - Dickie will get a good tea, anyway, and I'll take care of you. I'm not afraid of her!"

By now they had reached the edge of the crowd and saw that the big double doors in front of the shed were open and that some men in oilskins were busy round an enormous lifeboat. In a flash the twins had worked their way through to the front rank of spectators, and during a lull in the wind Penny, still at the back, heard their shrill treble as they demanded information. A big fisherman in a blue jersey smiled at them.

"They be just getting her ready in case she be wanted," he explained. "There's no trouble yet, but it'll be a dirty night with tide at the full."

"Is that why you've pulled all the fishing boats right up the beach?" Penny yelled, and the old man nodded. "Highest tide o' year tonight," he agreed. "There'll be trouble tonight surely."

Then Penny felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see an agitated Slinky behind her. He looked most unhappy and his suit was becoming marked by the rain and spray and his voice was shrill and peevish.

"Come quickly please, Miss Penny. This is no place to wait. It is cold and wet and Miss Ballinger is anxious to be off."

Penny looked him up and down.

"And what if she is? We don't have to do what she wants, do we? It's Mrs. Warrender's car, not hers... We'll come in a minute, but the twins want to see the lifeboat."

At this Mr. Grandon looked almost scared.

"I know, I know, Miss Penny. But I am afraid of the weather and I think we should go and you will come, please?"

Penny relented and dragged the protesting twins back to the car. Not much was said on the road. Once or twice the children noticed that Miss Ballinger made some remark in an undertone to Slinky, but the noise of the wind and the engine was too great for them to hear.

Just before they reached Winchelsea, Penny leaned forward and said:

"Please will you stop at the phone box. I just want to ring up Mrs. Warrender and tell her that we'll be with you for tea. She'll be worried if we're not back when we said."

Miss Ballinger did not answer, so Penny asked again.

"No need to telephone now, my dear. We'll only waste time. Let's get on as quickly as we can and then you'll be home more quickly in the end."

"We've jolly well got to telephone," Dickie said loudly. "You can't stop us... Penny wants to ring up... Please stop, Mr. Grandon..."

But Slinky did not, or would not, hear, and by now they were through the town and rushing down the hill under the Strand Gate to the level

marshlands. The twins both turned to look at Penny and saw that she looked rather white under her freckles. Mary felt for the bigger girl's hand and gave it a squeeze, while Dickie whispered, "What shall we do? Shall we murder them both?"

Penny, who felt scared for the first time, shook her head silently and wondered how stupid she had been to try and tackle this adventure without the others.

They were rushing now along the narrow winding road which led to the beach - the road along which she and Jon had trudged after their first tea-party at *Beach View* - and had just turned a sharp corner when Slinky muttered something under his breath and jammed on the brakes suddenly. A white-faced man in a sodden raincoat was standing in the middle of the road with his arms outstretched, and as soon as the car stopped he spoke through the driver's window.

"Thanks for stopping. Do you mind very much turning round and taking me back to the nearest telephone?... We must have help and it's urgent... They say the great bank will break tonight when the tide is high, but we can't do more without proper assistance. Sorry to bother you, but..."

"Nonsense!" said Miss Ballinger loudly. "Absolute nonsense. Drive on at once," and without questioning these orders, Slinky let in the clutch and the car moved forward. The man gave a shout of fury and toppled back into the wet grass at the side of the road, and when Penny looked through the window behind her he was shaking his fist at them.

"What did he mean and why couldn't we give him a lift?" Mary asked. "I want to go back to Rye now, anyway, and I don't think I want any tea even if Dickie does... And I don't like this weather."

"What did he mean about the great bank breaking?" Dickie persisted.

"Just hysteria, my dears," Miss Ballinger replied. "Don't take any notice. No such thing could happen. We haven't time now to give strangers a lift and he had no right to stop us like that. I want my tea and so do you."

But Penny was not sure that it was nonsense. She knew what the man meant and she remembered Vasson's views about the weather changing and what the old fisherman at Hastings had said less than an hour ago. She remembered the bank, too, for she had walked along it with Jon and they had talked then about what would happen if the sea broke through.

The car had left the road now and was bumping over the rough track that led to the beach. Ahead of them was the little hill with the black shed on top - the hill that was marked so clearly on the smugglers' map - and in its shelter Mr. Grandon stopped the car. He took a coloured handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped his forehead. He was a bad colour and had lost the jaunty mood of the morning, and Penny, trying to keep a cool head, realized how they had all accepted without question his domination by Miss Ballinger. Meanwhile, the latter seemed to have recovered her hospitable mood as she turned round and smiled at the children.

"Now we'll enjoy our tea," she said. "I think Mr. Grandon is right; we can't drive any farther in this weather... Better lock the car, Mr. Grandon, and take care of the key, for a lot of undesirable people appear to be about this afternoon... Now then. Come along. Perhaps Penny will lead the way."

The twins glanced at Penny, who nodded slightly. There was no choice now and no chance to run away, and not much sense in it if they did. They were here and had better make the best of it. She leaned across Mary on her left and opened the door to get out. The wind flung itself at her like a mad thing. It took the words from her mouth and wrapped her raincoat round her knees. It howled and sang and blustered in triumph, but at the back of its mad symphony was the constant roar of the waves pounding on the shingle beyond the great bank.

It was desperately hard going along the shingle to the bungalow, but they got there at last and the door was opened before they reached it by the fair-headed girl whom Penny already disliked heartily.

As they crowded into the tiny hall the girl raised her delicate eyebrows to Miss Ballinger, who muttered shortly, "This is all. Any news of the others?" and when the girl shook her head she led the way into the front room.

As soon as Penny crossed the threshold of this ugly little house for the second time she knew that she had made a mistake. When Mr. Grandon behind her closed the door and she heard the latch click home her heart began to thump uncomfortably and she felt sick with fear. She thought of Jon, too, and tried to think what he would do.

With a sigh she realized that he would have had the sense not to come. Then Miss Ballinger - a changed Miss Ballinger - spoke, and her manner was sharp.

"Now then, I've no time to waste. No, Richard. This is not going to be the sort of tea-party you anticipated. You two kids can go into the other room. It's Miss Penny I want... Grandon! Take 'em into the back room and lock 'em in with that unpleasant dog."

Before she had finished speaking the twins pushed past Slinky and stood sturdily at Penny's side. Macbeth, sensing the situation, showed his teeth and snarled.

"You just try and move us," Mary said as she stooped to pat him. "Just try - that's all we ask! I don't know what you think you're doing and what this is all about, but we jolly well know that you're wicked..."

"And we know some other things, too," Dickie said, and then stopped in alarm as Miss Ballinger, who was leaning against the mantelpiece lighting a cigarette, looked down at the little boy with a flash of her spectacles.

"Oh, we do, do we? Perhaps we do! Perhaps you had better stay after all."

"You can say what you like, but we are not going to leave Penny. You can't do anything to her. She's our friend and if any of you come near we'll... we'll... we'll fight you tooth and claw," Dickie shouted.

Miss Ballinger snapped, "Now, let's waste no more time. You two children sit down there if you must and listen to what I've got to say to your special friend, and understand that the sooner I get what I want the sooner Mr. Grandon will take you home... Now, Miss Penelope Warrender, take that

stubborn look off your face and listen to me. You're old enough to know that I mean business."

A few minutes ago Penny had been frightened. Then, as Miss Ballinger began to show in her speech all the vulgarity that one would expect, she felt angry. She felt the blood rise to her cheeks and her hands begin to tremble with anger. Mrs. Warrender had told her years ago that she must try and conquer those fits of rage that so often seemed to go with red hair, and she had not felt like this for ages. Then she began to go cold, but much calmer, and with the twins holding her hands she leaned back against the shoddy sideboard and listened while Miss Ballinger told an old story with a new variation.

She said bluntly that she intended to have the map which she was sure existed and any other papers which had anything to do with the treasure.

"I pay you the compliment, child," she said, "of not pretending. You and your friends know there is treasure to be found, and you know what I know. I intend to find this and am working for my friend here on his behalf."

"What friend?"

"Mr. Grandon, of course. I have already told you that I am an expert on antiques, and Mr. Grandon has asked me to help him. What you children have not been told is that Mrs. Warrender's old uncle who owned the *Dolphin* intended Mr. Grandon to have this treasure because he had served him so well. When the time comes, and the treasure is discovered, we can produce a letter from Mr. Charles Warrender to prove it."

"That's a lie!" Penny said indignantly. "You know it's not true."

"And how do you know it's not true?" Miss Ballinger asked.

Penny, too angry to notice the fair-haired girl flash a quick look at her aunt, unfortunately fell straight into the trap.

"How do I know?" she stormed. "I know because I've seen the letter old Uncle Charles wrote to Jon in which he tells him that the treasure is for...

Oh! What have I said?" and she put her hands over her eyes to hide the sudden, quick tears that came as she realized what she had done.

There was a long silence. Miss Ballinger regarded them with malevolent triumph. Slinky, by the door, shifted uneasily, and then the girl who had been lounging in an easy chair laughed shortly.

"Now we know!" she said. "I thought they had found something."

"Now we know," Miss Ballinger repeated with a quiet innocence that made even Dickie shiver, while Macbeth, now tucked under Mary's arm, growled warningly.

"Grandon, throw that disgusting dog out. I won't have it here. Put the dog down, child, and don't argue."

But Mary, with her big eyes dark in her white face, only hugged her friend closer.

"You great bullying beasts!" she stuttered. "Don't one of you dare to come near, else I'll make him kill you. We're not afraid of you, but wherever I go Mackie stays with me..."

"An' wherever Mary goes I go..." Dickie added with chin up. "An' now you've made Penny cry."

"They *haven't*, Dickie," Penny protested violently and put an arm round his shoulders. "Not really, anyway. It's only because I'm so furious... Anyway, what I said about the letter isn't true. I made it up... Now will you let us go? ..

We can't tell you anything about this treasure you keep talking about because we don't know anything."

"I see," said Miss Ballinger quietly. "But we are wasting time, and if we do not hurry the weather will be too bad for you to get home at all. I have a new suggestion to make," and she sat down suddenly at the table behind which the children were still standing defiantly. "You children can help us

more than you know, so let us get the business over and done with so that you can finish your holidays with plenty of jolly fun" - here Penny felt Dickie shudder - "and to do this I am prepared to make you a reasonable present each. Perhaps the twins would like nice new bicycles?"

"We got 'em," said Dickie tersely.

"Or another little dog," suggested Miss Ballinger, with cunning which was sadly misplaced.

"Why should we want *another?*" Mary asked.

"And you, Penny? There is sure to be something you would like. Just tell me what and you shall have it in exchange for one simple little favour,"

"And that is?" Penny asked with her head high.

"Just write a note *now* to your cousin Jonathan and ask him to come over right away with the letter you mentioned and all the other papers you found in the box in your room at the *Dolphin*... If you write the note at once Mr. Grandon will take it to Jonathan and bring him back in the car, and then you can all go back together and enjoy yourselves and forget all this unpleasantness."

For just one second Penny weakened. She could not give in now! With her head down she glanced at her three enemies.

Miss Ballinger, seated only three feet away, was watching her closely through her thick glasses.

Penny put a hand to her aching forehead and, with the gesture that Jon and Mrs. Warrender knew so well, flung back her head defiantly.

"I won't write anything," she said. "Even if we had the papers you keep talking about I wouldn't write for them. Why should I? You can't do anything to us, and you've no right to keep us here." She turned to Slinky. "As for you, Mr. Grandon, the best thing you can do is to take us home right away... You called it a truce this morning, didn't you?"

Miss Ballinger bowed her head in her hands. She suddenly looked dispirited and defeated and her niece watched her with growing astonishment.

"We'll go now," Penny said again more firmly.

"Very well," Miss Ballinger agreed. "Perhaps that would be best. I cannot keep you here, but I did hope you would do the sensible thing... Mr. Grandon will take you home..." and she got up heavily from the table and turned towards the door.

Penny's eyes were bright with excitement. She had won! They had beaten the three of them and in twenty minutes they would be home and this horrible bungalow would seem like a bad dream.

But she did not see Miss Ballinger's quick gesture to her niece, nor did she realize how quickly Slinky and the girl slipped out into the hall. When she glanced up again Miss Ballinger was glaring at them round the half-open door.

"Now, listen, and listen for the last time," she snarled. "You will stay here until I have the papers in my possession. If you will not help me to get them I must use other methods, and there are still plenty of ways in which young Jonathan Warrender can be persuaded to bring them here to me!"

"After her, Mackie boy! After her!" Mary shouted, and the little black warrior hurtled across the room as the door slammed and the lock clicked home.

"Quick!" Dickie yelled. "The window! We can get out there. Smash it!" But even as he spoke Grandon and Miss Ballinger passed outside and slammed across two heavy wooden shutters.

The fading daylight was shut out, and as for a moment the howling wind was lulled, there came the sound of an iron bar slipping into place, followed by Miss Ballinger's laugh.

10. Wednesday: Jon and David to the Rescue

What's it all about, Jon?" David demanded as they walked away from the telephone.

"We've got an invitation to tea," Jon explained, "and I don't like it. It was that girl - that girl who said she was Miss Ballinger's niece. She says Penny and the twins are over at the bungalow now and they want us to join them... She said that Penny wants me to bring the map and the papers and that it was very important... What do you think?"

"I should think she's a liar," David said shortly. "I can't imagine Penny sending a message like that."

"Neither can I, but the girl said Penny had important news for us."

"Of course she'd say that. I don't believe a word of it, but I'm puzzled to know how those kids were persuaded to go to the bungalow. Slinky took them to Hastings, didn't he? And your mother said it was Slinky's idea? Looks a bit odd, doesn't it, Jon? I think we'd better go. What did the girl suggest?"

"She telephoned from Winchelsea and says she'll pick us up in the car on the road. It may be a trap, but I'm going. I don't like the idea of Penny and the twins in that foul bungalow. I hated it when we went... but I'm not going to take any papers."

"All right. It's after tea-time and Slinky isn't back, so I should think the story is true and that they really are at *Beach View*. My parents will be back soon, too, I should think, and I'd like the twins to be home before they arrive. The weather is getting worse. Let's get our macs."

"I don't think I want to see my mother," Jon said. "She'll wonder what all the fuss is about and it will only waste time if we begin to explain. Just wait a sec. while I scribble a note to drop in her letter-box over the way."

They stumbled down Trader's Passage to the river and stood for a moment to recover their breath, looking at the muddy water swirling under the bridge. Two men were talking in the lee of one of the tarred drying-sheds, and one glanced up and saw the boys. It was Vasson, and he strolled over to speak to them.

"Where be you two going on a day like this? It'll be worse afore long, you know, and it's not much fun walking about in this."

"Is there any more news, Mr. Vasson?" David asked. "I mean about the lifeboats standing by."

"Not as I knows on, but chaps down at harbour all be ready. You be going down that way?"

"No, we've got to go down to Winchelsea beach to a bungalow belonging to somebody we know. Penny and the twins are there to tea."

Vasson pursed his lips for a whistle of surprise that was blown away in the gale.

"But you lads'll never get out there tonight. That beach is no place to be. If it goes on blowing like this - and blow it will till tide is full tonight - them folks in those liddle houses and shacks'll have to clear out, I'm thinking. Tide's turned, but she'll not be full till after dark, and they're real worried for the great bank, I hear tell."

"It's worse down there, is it, Mr. Vasson? Do they really think something like that will happen?"

"Aye, they do! And you say those youngsters and Miss Penny are there? Who took 'em there, I'd like to know. They went out this morning with that Mr. Grandon."

Before Jon could answer David nudged him. A shabby little green car was coming towards them down the road and they could see it was driven by the girl in the white mackintosh. As soon as she recognized the boys she stopped, leaned out and smiled at them.

"Glad you could both manage it. Decent of you to come. Hop in..."

"You must be David Morton? Penny told me about you. You're not much like the twins, are you?"

David grunted, but Jon was amused to see him redden. This girl made him feel like that, too! Then she turned to him:

"You've got the papers and things, Jon? Penny was very keen you should bring them."

Jon did not hesitate, but nodded briefly. She smiled at him radiantly, but before she could speak he said: "What's all the fuss about, anyway, and why didn't Penny ring me up herself, and why hasn't Mr. Grandon brought the twins home as he promised?"

"One thing at a time," she laughed as she let in the clutch. "My aunt met Mr. Grandon and the others at lunch in Hastings and she asked them to give her a lift home and stay to tea. Apparently, you people have got some old maps and papers which interest my aunt, and from what I hear Penny now wants her to see them. She didn't come and speak to you herself because she was helping to get the tea. I had the car out this afternoon and had just got back, so they asked me to telephone and then meet you. We haven't got a phone at the bungalow. As for Mr. Grandon, he realized that Mrs. Warrender would wonder where he was, so when I promised to bring you all back later he left the twins and started just before me. Hasn't he passed you?"

"Haven't seen him," Jon said suspiciously.

"We came down the steps," David explained.

"That accounts for it, then. Just as you walked down he would be coming up through the town. Now are you both satisfied?"

The wind was so strong now that it slowed down the little car and once actually lifted it off two wheels for a second when a sudden gust caught it broadside on. But their driver kept a cool head and laughed.

"Getting a bit rough," was all she said.

The wind was bringing rain again now and the reeds and tall bullrushes growing in the dike at the side of the road were laid almost flat on the water, which seethed as it was struck by the squall. Although the car windows were closed they could barely hear each other speak for the relentless, roaring of the wind.

"Hold tight," the girl said, and swung the car off the road on to the rutted track along which Penny and the twins had been driven only about an hour before. The little car lurched and swayed as it headed straight for the great bank of shingle behind which the highest tide of the year was now thundering up the beach.

Some men, drenched and hatless, ran up the track and signalled the car to stop. The girl hesitated before braking, and one of them signed to her to lower the window.

"What's the fuss?" she said coolly. "I'm in a hurry."

The man's face was glistening with wet and he was fighting for breath.

"Turn her round," he gasped. "Turn her round quickly and take us to the nearest phone. It's urgent."

Another man pushed forward. "Buck up!" he shouted.

"The bank will go for certain when the tide's right up! Some of it is shifting now, they say."

The girl hesitated.

"I'm going to *Beach View*," she said. "We shan't be long, and then I'll drive back myself to the telephone."

A big lorry came lurching along behind them. The track here ran on a ridge a few feet higher than the flat marsh on the left and yet lower than some shingly hillocks which rose quite sharply on the right. Although two small cars might have managed to pass each other, there was no room for the huge

lorry which so suddenly loomed up behind them. Looking out of the rear window, Jon could see that it was piled high with what looked like bundles of faggots. The driver, now leaning from his cab, switched on his headlights and kept his hand on the button of the horn. Several other men carrying spades and picks tumbled off the lorry and ran forward, and one of them put his hand on the door and shouted:

"We can't pass you. Get on or get out of the way. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," the girl said, "I'm going on."

Just at that moment, by some freak, the wind died down and, except for the roar of the sea, there was an odd, almost uncanny, silence. Voices, raised a few seconds before to be heard above the gale, now sounded harsh and hysterical. A man who was standing in the middle of the track was pointing urgently away to the left, where the great bank loomed over the sullen lagoon which Jon remembered seeing on the afternoon he had come with Penny to *Beach View* for the first time. The last gleams of daylight lingered over this pool and the ridge of the bank above as yet another man came running and stumbling madly towards them. Jon wound down his window suddenly, and in the strange lull they heard every word as he yelled:

"She's going up yonder! Up beyond the last of those huts where the men are. She'll be through soon and the water's coming up underneath the bank... What are you waiting for?..." and the remainder of the sentence was carried away by the wind which rose again to a shriek of triumph as Jon saw a great plume of spray thrown into the air high over the bank and then flung towards them in the gale until it spattered the windscreen.

"Out of the way, all of you," the girl shouted as she eased her left foot and the little car jumped forward amidst the shouts of those who were now hurrying towards them from the beach.

"The lorry is following us. They've got away all right," David shouted. "Gosh! I wouldn't have missed this for anything."

Jon muttered, "I'll be glad to see Penny and the kids, though, and get them home again... Vasson was right again, wasn't he, David?... Look at the

crowd under the hill there... they're smashing the windows of a car... Look, David, I'm sure that's our car..." He leaned forward and shook the girl's shoulder. "Here, you," he yelled. "I thought you said Grandon had driven home and passed us in Rye. That's our car there."

She wriggled her shoulder free.

"Strong boy!" she said. "And my name's Valerie, and you had better call me Val, like everybody else, and not just 'you'... Now listen to what I say, because it's important. I'm going to drive down a little way on the shingle at the side of the hill because there's not so many people there! Before I stop, nip out, one each side, and I'll lock the doors from inside. Don't let anyone get so much as a finger inside the car and I'll manage to lock my own door somehow and bring the key with me... Are you ready? Right! Jump for it."

Neither of the boys attempted to argue for they realized at once that her suggestion was wise. As the car lurched on to the loose shingle in the comparative shelter of the hill, they opened the doors and jumped out. Jon stumbled and fell to his knees, and as he got up a wild-eyed woman rushed towards them.

"Lend me your car," she pleaded. "We daren't wait any longer. Turn it round and take us back to Winchelsea." Before Jon could answer Valerie was beside him and locking the door handle. Then she turned to the stranger.

"We're just fetching some children," she shouted. "Don't tell anyone else and we'll try and give you a lift if there's room... But don't tell anyone." Then she slipped between the boys and took their arms. "That will keep her quiet, I hope," she went on. "Now buck up, for we've no time to waste... Come along this way behind the bungalows."

Although they both felt wildly excited they were also rather scared. Jon was unhappy about Penny, and David, although he knew from experience that the twins were very skilled in the art of getting out of trouble, realized that they were all in very real danger. Not only were they in danger from the sea and the storm, but he was afraid that if the crowd got out of hand, it would be almost impossible to drive the car back. Jon was certain, too, that the girl had lied to them about Grandon. He was confident that it was the *Dolphin*

car which they had passed at the end of the track, and this meant that Slinky was likely to be at the bungalow. It also meant that they were probably walking straight into a trap. He was thankful that he had not brought the papers. He wondered if David had got the same idea? It was clever of the girl to separate them like this and he was not sure but he fancied that her hand tightened on his arm just as if she could read his thoughts.

"Here we are," she said suddenly. "But we'll have to go up by the side of the house. We're not important enough to have a back door of our own! Hang on tight now, else the wind'll have us over," and she turned to face the gale roaring over the top of the great bank.

They struggled together through the loose shingle by the side of a deserted bungalow till they reached the track that ran under the bank and along which Jon and Penny had trudged when they had first visited *Beach View*. Valerie unlatched the little garden gate, and it was at that moment that the chimney on the next bungalow crashed. Jon saw it fall. It was outlined sharply against the storm-tossed sky, and some of the brick-work must have been loose, for the pot swayed twice before it finally smashed through the flimsy tiles of the roof. Valerie had not even stopped and was hurrying up the path when a strange, shapeless bulk detached itself from the gloom of the porch. David stopped for a moment, reminded of the many strange legends he had heard when they had lived in the Shropshire hills. As he paused he felt Jon's hand on his wrist.

"This is a trap," Jon whispered. "We've got to find the others and get out as quickly as we can. I bet Slinky's in here... But the place looks closed. The shutters are up! Gosh! What's that thing?"

The figure loomed forward and then they both saw that it was Miss Ballinger wrapped in a loose black cloak. As they got nearer they could see that she was shouting, but the noise of the wind and sea drowned her words. Valerie hurried towards her and then, in one of those eerie lulls when the wind dropped for a moment, the boys were able to hear her speak.

"You've been too long," she snapped at the girl. "Much too long. We've got to get out of here quickly. Have you brought the papers? Come in here, you two, and be quick about it."

This was a very different Miss Ballinger from the artist in the train or from the teller of tales Jon remembered at the first tea-party. Her face now was white and strained and beaded with perspiration. Her greying hair was blowing untidily under a ridiculous black beret, and there was a heavy suitcase at her feet which got in her way as she tried to crowd them all into the tiny hall. Suddenly Jon felt stubborn and unafraid. He was angry but, at the same time, quite cool as he crossed the threshold.

"Shut the door," Miss Ballinger snapped again. "We can't hear ourselves speak... Now then, you boys, have you brought...?"

"Excuse me interrupting you, Miss Ballinger," Jon said, "but we've come here for my cousin and the Morton twins. We were asked to tea, but you seem to be going out in a hurry... And if Mr. Grandon is here I ought to tell him that my mother is very angry with him for not bringing the others home at tea-time as he promised."

This was a brave speech, but nobody seemed to take any notice of it. Valerie was standing against the closed door of the front room, while her aunt waved her hand vaguely and led them into the back room. Here an oil lamp was burning, and this, with the glow of the fire, made a more cheerful picture than the narrow, dark and draughty hall.

The boys followed her in expecting to see the others, but the room was empty except for Slinky, who was biting his nails over by the shuttered windows. Miss Ballinger closed the door.

"Now," she said. "Let's have no more nonsense. I offered you twenty pounds for all the papers and maps you have found in that old box in the top room at the *Dolphin*... There's no time to argue now, so if you want more money I'll give you more, because I'm in a hurry, but I must have the papers at once... I've got to be off."

They all had to shout to make themselves heard. The walls and floor were shaking with the pounding of the waves and the force of the wind, and there was a strange smell of stale sea water in the house. But Jon was no longer afraid.

"I've got no papers or maps of any sort with me," he shouted as the house shook again, "and if I had they belong to us and to my mother and are nothing to do with you."

"You little liar!" Valerie screamed and stepped towards Jon with her hand raised as if to strike him. "You have got them. You told me you'd got them when I met you."

"I didn't say anything actually," Jon replied. "And I wish now I'd told you right out that I hadn't brought any papers... Anyway, it doesn't matter what you say or do, because even if there were any papers they are nothing to do with you!" and in his excitement he got quite red in the face and went close to Valerie and yelled at her. Miss Ballinger snarled something at the girl which sounded like "fool" and then David broke in.

"And what have you done with my brother and sister? Where are they? We've come to take them home."

"Yes, and where's Penny?" Jon added. "Penny! Penny!" he yelled suddenly, but the noise outside was too great for him to be heard outside the room. Miss Ballinger turned to Slinky.

"Go outside," she said, "and see how things are. Let me know at once if everybody else on the beach has left."

Grandon, with bent, shamed head, slipped past the boys and obeyed his orders.

"Now sit down you two and I'll be quick with what I've got to say. Give me those papers or promise me on your honour that you will give them all to me with any other information you may have found out in the morning and you shall go home at once with Penny and the twins."

"Are they in the house, then?" Jon demanded.

"Never mind where they are, but you can be sure they are safe with me and in my care and they can be exchanged for the papers I need - the papers and map which will lead me to the treasure."

"But you can't do that! How dare you! You can't keep them here like that! Why! Why, it's kidnapping, and you can go to prison for it. Let them out at once and we'll all go home. We'll walk if you like, but we're going home and you can't stop us."

"But I am stopping you?... You cannot go now and I have the others safe and they cannot go either. And in an hour they say the sea will be through the bank... You see, Jonathan, I need those papers and I intend to have them. Neither do I intend to be interfered with by a gang of rude, unruly and ill-mannered children... Give me your promise, Jonathan - your word of honour for you both - and you can go home with the others at once."

Before Jon could answer the door crashed open and Slinky shouted excitedly:

"Come at once! We must go now, for all have left the beach. A man with a megaphone is calling that the sea cannot be kept back much longer... I am going... I shall take the car... If you are coming, come now..." and his voice died away in a miserable wail. Jon and David looked him up and down with disdain. He was a contemptible figure with his smart grey suit creased, damp and dirty, and his shiny black hair hanging loosely over his narrow forehead. His eyes were wild and frightened and his fingers plucked nervously at his mouth and little black moustache.

"You coward," Jon said bitterly. "You miserable coward! If you don't tell me where the others are and get them away at once you'll be responsible and I'll tell everyone - and you'd better not go back to the *Dolphin* else it will be the worse for you. We all know what part you've played in this."

Mr. Grandon glared at them, ran his fingers through his tousled hair and bolted out of the room. Miss Ballinger seemed to catch something of his panic for she grabbed her niece by the arm and drew her towards the door.

"Get out!" she snapped. "We've got to go."

"But you can't leave them all here like this," Valerie began and then turned to the boys. "Don't be such a fool, Jon. Give your promise and we'll all get out of here."

"Get out yourself," Miss Ballinger roared, "and keep quiet, too."

She pushed her out into the hall, and before the boys could move the door was slammed and locked.

Jon and David stared at each other and then the latter's face broke into a broad grin.

"Well, well!" he said. "We're in for it now... Come on, Jon. Try the door first and then the window. We've got to search the house for the others."

They rushed to the door, but it was locked fast, and while they were tugging at the handle they heard the front door slam.

"What dirty tykes they are!" Jon gasped. "Get a chair, David, and we'll smash the panels in... I wish I knew whether those kids were safe."

"Just a sec., Jon... Let's try the windows first... We can open them easily enough from here, but the shutters are fastened from the outside. P'raps the door will be less trouble, but let's hurry... Can you smell water? I can sniff something damp and the storm is worse than ever. The house will collapse if we're not quick."

Jon reached for the poker and had dealt the first smashing blow to the panel when there was a noise behind them.

They wheeled round in time to see the wooden window shutters suddenly flung back and then something heavy hurtled through the glass and a large stone landed on the table. The wind tore and whistled through the broken pane. Something smaller followed the stone and fell with a clink into the fireplace, and as David stooped to pick up a key Jon, open-mouthed with astonishment, realized that Valerie was outside and calling to them. Her voice came faintly through the turmoil, but although she had gone almost as soon as she had spoken, he thought he heard her say:

"They're in the front room. But hurry, hurry! The bank is breaking and the sea is coming in."

11. Wednesday: Noah's Ark

When the shutters closed out the light and they heard the iron bar which locked them fast clang into place, Penny and the twins were almost too surprised to realize that they were actually imprisoned in the front room of *Beach View*, Macbeth was still barking furiously at the closed door, and the noise of the wind and pounding waves seemed to be increasing. The room was not quite dark; a thin line of light where the shutters did not fit showed them the position of the window, but as the light outside was failing fast Penny knew that before very long they would be in complete darkness.

Rather more sharply than she intended, she said:

"Keep the dog quiet, Mary. He can't do any good by making that noise."

"Be quiet, Mackie! Come here!" Mary said, and although she spoke softly the little dog obeyed at once and came over, wagging his tail but still growling quietly. Mary picked him up and he licked her face.

"You're a brave boy, darling, but just keep quiet now, 'cos we're going to have a council of war... I don't care for it dark like this, do you, twin?"

Dickie was fidgeting between the window and the door.

"No, I don't like it. I don't like the way the sea keeps banging away outside there."

Mary said: "I wish we could see. Where are you, Penny?"

"I'm here. Don't worry. We'll soon get out of this... Jon will come, you'll see! He'll find out and come. I specially asked Auntie to let him know where we'd gone."

"I'm going to break the door down now," Dickie said. "Let's make so much noise that they'll have to let us out."

"Not much sense in that really," Penny said. "Let's try and get out by cunning. They won't take any notice of noise. Are you twins cunning?"

Penny could not see him clearly, but she sensed that Dickie was grimacing wildly.

"Are we cunning?" he muttered, and then, "But all the same I'm going to kick the door."

Unfortunately he forgot that he was wearing sandals and his yell of baffled fury was partly a cry of pain. Mary groped her way over to him.

"Hard luck, Dickie!" she said. "Never mind. P'raps we could smash the window presently and if we have to make a noise we'll make Mackie bark again."

"Come here, you two," Penny said. "I've got a brainwave. Let's camp under this table and make no noise at all. If we don't fuss I bet they'll soon wonder what's happened to us and then they'll come and open the door. When they do we'll still keep quiet and if they look in they won't see us at first."

"What do we do then?" asked the realist Dickie. "Overpower them, I suppose, by lurin' them under the table."

"I'm not sure what we do then," Penny said doubtfully, "but I think that if we keep quiet then they will have to do something. Let's try it once, anyway... Come on!"

They crawled under the table and Penny noticed that the strip of light at the window was fading fast. Macbeth seemed rather astonished that his friends should join him on the floor, and Mary was uneasy about it all.

"I think maybe we ought to sing a bit," she said. "Just to keep our spirits up. This is the sort of time and place for us to sing."

"We won't sing anything," Penny whispered urgently. "Just be quiet. I believe someone tried the door."

Instantly the twins froze and Mary put her hand on Macbeth's collar. The window was rattling behind the shutters and the floor shook with the power of the waves thundering up the beach such a short distance away. They strained their ears to catch any other sound, and suddenly the lock clicked back and a crack of yellow light showed as the door opened an inch. Penny slipped an arm round the shoulders of each twin and breathed, "Quiet! Hear what she's got to say."

For a long moment there was no other sound from the door. Penny sensed Miss Ballinger standing there and waiting for them to beg her to let them go.

"Let her wait," she thought. "Let her do the wondering and the worrying. I know Jon will come presently."

Then they heard the hated voice.

"Are you listening, children?"

No answer.

"Can you hear me?... It's no use sulking and it's no use pretending you're not here... Answer me!"

Silence. Mary held her hand firm now over Macbeth's muzzle, while the little dog trembled with fury.

"Very well! Go on sulking then. Grandon! Fetch me my torch from the bedroom... These little fools are pretending they're not there... Now listen... Jonathan and the other boy will be here soon with the map and other papers, but it will save us all a lot of time if you, Penny, tell me all you know. Tell me if you know what 'nt 8 April 7' means."

Penny drew her breath in sharply and felt Mary's shoulders trembling against her arm. So they had not got as far as "earthen vessels"! She almost laughed aloud in triumph! How bucked the others would be when they heard this. She could not help wondering, though, how Miss Ballinger was going to persuade David and Jon to come over without the message she had

refused to write. She was certain that the boys would find some way of rescuing them, but it was not likely that they would tell their enemies that they were coming. She supposed this must be another trick.

Miss Ballinger was speaking again. "The torch. Thank you... Now, will you children see reason and tell me what you know," and she flashed the beam round the room and then cried out sharply: "Come out of hiding. Where are you all?" and then, just as the beam moved towards them across the floor, Mary whispered:

"Go on, Mackie boy! After her! Seek her, boy!"

Macbeth needed no second invitation, but shot from his mistress's restraining hand like a little black bullet towards his enemy. At the same time Dickie crawled from under the table, and with an exultant cry of what sounded like "Up the Lone Piners," charged towards the door.

Then a lot happened at the same time. Miss Ballinger shouted and kicked out to protect herself from Macbeth. The kick, by an unlucky chance, caught Mackie just as he was launching himself to the attack and bowled him over. He yelped with surprise and pain and then again with annoyance as Dickie, hot on his heels, fell over him. Miss Ballinger, in her fury, dropped the torch, which rolled, still alight, towards Penny, who was just emerging from under the table. As boy and dog on the floor began to sort themselves out, Miss Ballinger muttered something very unladylike and slipped back into the hall, slamming and locking the door again before Dickie could get to his feet.

Penny grabbed the torch and shone it on Dickie who, scarlet in the face with rage and humiliation, was beating his fists on the thin panels of the door.

Mary said: "I don't think we've been very clever, Penny, do you? We weren't very cunning that time. What do we do now?"

Penny laughed. "Come in the camp again... Actually, we've been quite clever. We've got the torch, and by what she said they don't know as much about the clues as we do, although they stole that bit of paper... Come on, Dickie. We mustn't waste this battery."

Dickie had his ear to the panel of the door and suddenly turned and shouted: "She's come back! I can hear her outside. I think it's her. She's going to open the door again."

As the line of orange light showed again, Dickie squeezed behind the door so that he could not be seen by anyone opening it from the other side.

"You see, it's no use behaving like that," came Miss Ballinger's voice again. "Now, unless you, Penny, give me your word of honour that you know absolutely nothing about 'nt 7 April 8' or about any other clues you may hold, I shall tell the boys when they arrive - and they are on their way now - that you have all gone with Mr. Grandon, and then we shall leave you alone here in the bungalow when we go... and I presume you are old enough and intelligent enough to know what that means? Come over here, child, and talk to me and be sensible."

She spoke in a cold, calm voice that frightened Penny far more than her shouting and blustering. For the first time in their adventure she had the feeling that Miss Ballinger really had them in her power and that she was crazy enough to carry out her threat. Penny had never before believed that an adult would really do this sort of thing, and she suddenly felt horribly defenceless and alone, for although the twins, with all their courage, were with her she knew that she was responsible for them, and the idea of being locked in this dark room in a deserted house with the storm raging outside and the possibility of the sea breaking through was not very inviting.

Penny was now afraid and not at all sure what to do for the best. After a moment's hesitation she whispered to Mary:

"Take the torch, Mary, and stay here. If she opens the door any wider, or if you can't see me against the bright light, switch it on... Where's Dickie?... There he is, behind the door... And keep Mackie quiet again... I'm going over to talk to her."

Mary grabbed her arm. "Don't go, Penny. She's an old beast. She'll trick you. She'd never dare do what she says."

"I know she wouldn't," Penny lied bravely, "so don't worry. It's only that I want to hear what she's got to say. Here's the torch," and she walked over to the door, pushed Dickie gently out of the way and said quietly:

"Here I am, Miss Ballinger. I've told you already that I've got no maps or papers about any hidden treasure, so will you please stop bullying us and let us go. You know I'm responsible for these two and I must get them back home... I know you were only joking about keeping us here, but it's a silly joke all the same."

She could see Miss Ballinger's thick spectacles gleaming at her through the crack in the door, and she thought she could see Slinky behind her.

"I was not joking, my child. I have been trying ever since I came down here to make you children see reason, and I will not be trifled with any longer... Now, tell me what you know..." and with these last words she suddenly swung the door open and grabbed at Penny in the hope of dragging her into the hall. But Penny was just too quick; as the arm shot out to catch her she ducked and pushed hard on the door, stepping back into the room at the same time. Then Dickie snouted and rushed forward. Mary switched on the torch and Macbeth once again dashed into the fray. Penny cried out with pain as something scratched her face, and then the door was slammed and locked once again.

"I said it was a trick!" Mary said indignantly. Then, "Oh, Penny, darling - you're bleeding. What did she do to you?"

Penny dabbed with a dirty handkerchief.

"Must have been her nails, I s'pose. She tried to get me out into the hall."

"She'd have tortured you," said Dickie solemnly; "that's what she'd have done. Gosh! What an awful adventure we're having!"

So they settled down again with Penny between the twins and Macbeth with his head on Mary's legs. Penny felt that they should save the torch battery, so they sat in darkness. There did not seem anything else to do, for although

she knew very definitely that they were prisoners, she was equally certain that Jon would come and rescue them. For a time none of them spoke.

The noise of the storm was deafening. The house was shaking, soot was falling down the chimney and the floor trembled as the mighty waves pounded against the bank outside.

After a time Mary began to sing. She had a clear little voice which, for some reason which Penny could not explain, made her feel very choky. Dickie and Penny joined in. They had to sing very loudly above the noise of the storm, and it was when Mary had switched to the nursery relic which began "I had a little nut tree, and nothing would it bear, save a silver nutmeg and a golden pear," when her voice suddenly quavered and died away.

"What is it, Mary?" Penny shouted. "What's wrong?"

She felt Mary's cold little hand on her shoulder and bent her head to catch her shocked cry.

"Penny! The floor's all wet over my side. I've got my hand in water... Penny! Come and feel it."

They were sitting on cushions, but as soon as Penny leaned across and flashed on the torch, Dickie yelled:

"It's this side, too! We're being flooded out!"

In the dimming light they could see a dark stain spreading over the thin, patterned carpet - spreading even as they watched - and over by the fireplace, where the boards were bare, water was sucking and bubbling up from under the floor. Penny felt her face go white and her scalp tickled with fear as she realized that the sea must either have broken through the great bank and be swirling round the house or else forcing its way up through the shingle. Dickie knew what it meant, too!

"The sea's coming in!" he yelled. "We'll have to smash the windows and try the shutters again," and it was just as he was scrambling out that Penny,

through all the turmoil, thought she heard a heavy crash which might have been the front door.

She tried to keep her voice steady as she shouted:

"Help! Help us, whoever you are! We're locked in the front room!"

Mackie began to bark madly again and to make little angry dashes at the water bubbling in the corner by the fireplace. Mary scrambled off her damp cushion and climbed on the table as Dickie lifted a vase of flowers and threw it with all his strength at the window. Above the tinkle of falling glass Penny heard him laugh in triumph. He liked smashing things!

"Don't cut yourself, Dickie," Penny yelled. "Wait till I get the light on... Right! Now break the rest and we'll see if there's any way of forcing up that iron bar from inside."

"I'll jolly well..." CRASH went two more panes. "I'll jolly well smash the jolly lot..." CRASH!... "and the iron bar and everything. I'm feeling jolly strong."

Now the wind whistled through the narrow gap between the shutters, and Penny was shining the torch round the untidy room when there came a heavy knocking on the door and a muffled shout. They all stood still - Dickie with a wooden cake-stand poised above his head ready for a new assault on the shutter, Mary on the table and Penny, by the fireplace, with the beam of the torch focused on the door.

"It's Jon!" she shouted. "I knew he'd come."

And the lock clicked and the door opened and there was Jon's cheerful, bespectacled face, crowned with an unruly mop of hair, blinking and grinning rather sheepishly. Over his shoulder David was peering, and it was he who spoke first.

"Are you there, kids?" and then, "All right, Penny?"

Then Jon said, "I can't see you, but I s'pose it's you flashing that thing right on my face... It would be! Point it down!... Quick now. Out this way. The great bank is breaking."

Dickie dashed for the door in his excitement, but Mary waited for Penny, who felt more like crying than laughing now that they were safe, and did not know what to say as she splashed through the puddles to the hall.

Jon pushed Mary in front of him and grinned at Penny.

"All right, Newpenny? Sure?"

She gulped back the quick tears and nodded. When she could trust her voice again she said:

"Yes, we're all O.K. Where are those beasts who locked us in?"

"Bolted, of course," David said over his shoulder as he fumbled with the latch on the front door. "Look out now, you kids, and hang on to me because I don't know what will happen when I open the door... All right behind? Right! Here she goes!"

There was a shattering crash as the wind flung the door back against the wall and the tinkle of falling glass as the coloured panes smashed to pieces. A picture fell and everything around them seemed to be shaking and collapsing as the gale filled the house with wind.

"Buck up, David!" Jon urged from behind. "Down the side of the next-door house where we came up, and we'd better make for that little hill."

They struggled out into the wind, which tore at their hair and plucked at their clothes and whistled round their legs. The daylight had gone now and only a few streaks of angry red behind the black clouds showed where the sun had sunk in the west. And over in the east the full moon was rising over a wild and fantastic scene. As the children turned their backs to the sea it seemed as if they were alone in a wilderness of empty shacks and bungalows.

"The others can't be far ahead," David called over his shoulder, "and if we catch them before they can start the car, we'll force them to take us back with them. They dare not refuse when they see we've all escaped... Gosh! It's wet here. Careful how you go."

In between the bungalows the shingle now was loose and wet, but when they looked back the great bank was still holding, although the ground was shaking with the force of the waves. They turned to the right at the back of the bungalows and made for the foot of the hill, where the cars had been left. Here the path had disappeared under a sheet of water, which crept nearer their feet as they watched.

"Don't wait!" Jon shouted. "Go straight through it. Don't worry about getting your feet wet. No time to waste!"

They were half-way through and Dickie was up to his knees when he stopped.

"Where's Mary?" he demanded.

They looked back and were just able in the gloom to distinguish her on the edge of the pool. She was stooping over something at her feet.

David was furious. "Silly little ass!" he muttered, and then cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted:

"Paddle through it, Mary. Buck up! Nobody will say anything if you get your feet wet... Nothing to be afraid of... Look at Dickie... It's only to his knees now..."

Mary shook her head and then lifted up Mackie. They could see that she was shouting, but her voice was not strong enough to be heard, so, still muttering, David turned and floundered back towards her.

"Hurry on, Jon," he called as he passed, "and take Dickie with you... See if you can catch them before they start the car."

But Dickie insisted on going back with David for Mary, and there was so much confusion and argument that precious time was wasted.

Mary explained that Mackie did not like salt water and would not even swim through it, and she refused to cross the pool herself unless Penny carried the dog. David then took Mary on his back and Jon took Dickie, while poor Penny had to flounder through the water as best she could with Macbeth snuggled under her arm.

As soon as they were all safely over, Jon and David raced ahead to the foot of the hill, but they were too late - far down the rough track that led to the road they saw the red tail-light of a car. They could not be certain that it was Miss Ballinger's, but there was no doubt that this was the last car to leave the beach and that they would have to trudge back to Winchelsea and safety.

"I doubt if these kids will make it," David said. "If Mary hadn't played the fool over the dog we would have caught them up."

Jon nodded. "I know. Do you realize that the Ballinger would have left the twins and Penny there in that place?... Look, David! The car has disappeared now, but there's something coming towards us down the track now... It's another big lorry loaded with faggots."

So they stood for a few minutes, a lonely little group at the foot of the hill. The rain had stopped and the rising moon gleamed sometimes through the gaps in the racing clouds, but all the air was filled with the mighty thunder of the waves behind them. They watched the lorry lurching towards them, and David wondered if perhaps they could wait until it was unloaded and then get a lift back to Winchelsea. Then the moon came out from behind a cloud again and a man standing on the lorry suddenly waved his arms and shouted.

"He's pointing at us," Mary said. "He's shouting... What do we do next, David?"

"Look!" David shouted. "Watch the bank. I saw it move. Something's happened to it... it's changing shape..."

Penny shouted against the noise almost without realizing what she was saying, clutched Mary close to her and screamed.

"It's breaking... *The sea's coming through!*"

The next few moments were like a nightmare - a nightmare in which something terrifying rushes towards the dreamer who cannot move to save himself and then, at the very last instant, wakes. But none of them could wake now, although it must have been a minute before Jon shouted:

"Quickly! Up the hill!"

They stood helpless and watched the tiny figures of men scatter along the top of the bank; they saw the other men, from the lorry which had just passed them, jump out, run and climb the bank to join those already flying from that one spot where they had been working with planks and clay and bundles of faggots to repair the breach. They saw this part of the bank move - rather as an elephant might stir in his sleep - and surge a little forward. In the lights of the headlights they saw the top of the bank sink a trifle and then, in a mighty cloud of spray, a hundred feet or more of shingle collapsed under the weight of the waves. For the first time in hundreds of years, the sea came surging through the gap, spread hungrily over the nearby levels and crept slowly inland to take back its own.

At Jon's shout they all came out of their dream and followed him in a mad scramble up the sides of the little hill. Jon stopped, after a few steps, and held out his hand to Penny, who had stumbled and was limping with the pain in her knee.

Jon paused for breath and pulled Penny up beside him. She slipped an arm through his and said:

"Let's wait here a sec. The water can't reach us here, anyway, and I want to see what those men are going to do."

David flung himself down at their feet.

"What are those men going to do?" Jon broke in. "Some of them are going down the bank to try and start the lorry. I s'pose it's not too deep there and if they could get it on the track down here the water may be shallow enough for them to get through."

They watched them struggle through the rushing water, climb up and then the lorry came back towards them. The driver was obviously making for the track, and after two attempts with the water swirling round the axles he managed to reach the higher level and turn the lorry inland. The man saw them and leaned out of his cabin.

"Can't wait now, but don't worry, kids!" he shouted. "I've got to go back for help, but I'll send the lifeboat for you if need be!" and they saw his teeth gleam in a friendly grin in the moonlight... "Don't fret... You're like old Noah in his Ark!" and he pointed up behind them and the children saw that the little black hut which crowned the hill did look rather like a toy ark with its pointed roof.

They watched it until it turned into the road at the end of the track and then saw that the other lorries were almost completely under water. Some of the men who had been working on the bank were now going back to the gap, but there did not seem much they could do to stop the water until the tide turned.

Jon ran his fingers through his hair.

"We're in for it now, and in for the night, too. What shall we do?"

"Climb to the top," David said. "That's what hills are for!"

Now that the tide was near turning the wind was dropping in sympathy, and when they reached the little plateau upon which the black hut stood, the moon sailed above the ragged clouds and they could see far inland to Winchelsea and all along the bank to Cliff End. Towards Rye it looked as if there was another break, but the flood water, although not deep, was still spreading over the grassy levels and still coming in through the gap.

They stood against the rough tarred boards of the hut and Mary suddenly lurched heavily against Penny, who looked down at the little girl in surprise.

"Tired?" she asked quietly.

"... Um - just a bit," Mary nodded. "I'm funny in the legs, but don't tell the others. I'm gettin' cold, too."

Jon and David moved away a few steps and started a consultation.

Penny smothered a terrific yawn. She was annoyed with the boys for whispering together and in the normal way would have had something to say about it, but now she stayed with the twins and fussed Macbeth until they came back. Jon grinned apologetically at Penny and gave her arm a friendly squeeze as he said:

"Sorry about that! We're probably here for the night so we'd better try and make ourselves comfortable... Let's see if we can get into the hut."

They crowded round the door, which was fastened with a padlock, but David's big scout knife soon loosened the staple.

"It's a pity to break in, but I don't think anybody will mind really," said Jon as he swung the door back.

It was too dark to see much, but the smell which greeted them was not very pleasant - stale and fishy.

"Has anybody got a match or a light?" David asked peevishly.

"Do stand away from the door," Jon went on. "Let me get in and look round."

"I should think something has died in there," Penny said wrinkling her nose. "I don't like it. I'm going to sit down outside here away from the wind... Come on, Mary, come and keep me warm."

"It's full of old fishing nets and shrimping nets," Jon called from inside, "and there's lots of rubbish on the floor... There's something hanging on the

wall, though - I've just banged my head on it... It's a hurricane lamp... and it's got oil in it... And, here are some matches on the edge close by it..."

They all crowded in and got in his way, but eventually he lighted the lamp and they could see at once that the hut was nothing more than a fisherman's unsavoury store.

"I shall be sick if I stay here," Mary said. "It's disgusting'!"

"Didn't you say that this hill was marked on the smugglers' map, Jon?" David asked. "Maybe the treasure is hidden here somewhere. P'raps this hill is a burial place and full of earthen vessels."

"Perhaps it is, but I'm not looking for it tonight! I'm getting cold and Dickie's teeth are louder than the waves now... I vote we build a fire just outside here - there's lots of rubbish and wood shavings and old planks on the floor - and try and keep warm."

"Lovely," Penny agreed. "And we'd better take our shoes and socks off to dry. Mine are wet through."

This did seem to be the best plan, for none of them relished the inside of the hut and they soon got a fire burning on the landward side. David held his jacket over Jon as the latter crouched down with a match and blew some glowing shavings into flame. When Jon emerged, breathless with blowing and with streaming eyes, he walked round the hut to get out of the smoke and suddenly let out a wild yell.

"Come and look... *Beach View* is on fire!"

The others came rushing round and Dickie pranced a triumphant war dance as flames burst out through the shutters of the back room of the hated bungalow.

"I s'pose the wind blew the lamp over when we opened the front door," David said, "and the heat and flames have taken all this time to melt the glass and set fire to the bungalow."

Even if the sea water had forced its way up through the floor of *Beach View* it was not wet enough to stop the fire, and there had been plenty of inflammable material in the back room. There was still enough wind to fan the flames to fury, and within a very few minutes they could see that nothing could save the bungalow.

After a little Mary said, "I'd rather sit by our fire, thank you. I don't like houses on fire even when they belong to beastly people... Come on, twin! Bring some more wood."

David said: "Come and sit down here and keep warm."

And so, muttering to himself, the restless Dickie came back to the fire which was now blazing cheerily. They sat as near to it as they could, with their backs to the rough sides of the hut out of the wind, which was at last subsiding. Mary, with Macbeth across her legs, was already asleep in the crook of Penny's arm. The fierce, flickering flames threw strong lights and shadows through her curls, and when Dickie squeezed down between her and David she barely stirred.

"Why does she waste time going to sleep?" he grumbled, but four minutes later David smiled to see that even the indomitable Richard had followed her example.

Penny, the other side of Mary, was next to Jon, who was lolling back with his hands in his pockets, whistling softly as he watched the flames. The wind, though not nearly as strong, was still whistling round the hut, but the thundering of the waves was not so noticeable. It was a strange scene with the moon above and the water all round the little hill. Men were still to be seen on the bank by the great gap but, from where they were all sitting round their camp fire, they could not see the blazing ruins of *Beach View*.

After a long silence Jon said:

"Rum end to the day, Penny!"

"Um!" she agreed sleepily.

David leaned forward and flung two more chunks of wood on to the fire. A shower of sparks flew upwards and were scattered in the wind as Penny's red head nodded and then slipped down on to Jon's shoulder.

An hour later the tide had turned and the wind had dropped. Two big lorries and a fire engine with a searchlight and some trailer pumps came splashing down the still submerged track.

"You awake, Jon?" David called.

"Yes - and nearly paralysed. Little Penny's been asleep on me... We'd better nip down and stop that chap... Chuck more wood on the fire and make a blaze so that they'll see... Sorry, Newpenny! Try leaning the other way."

Penny stirred, sat up suddenly, and looked round in surprise as she felt her cheek where it was marked by the rough tweed of Jon's jacket. He rumpled her head and grinned before setting off down the hill with David behind him.

The searchlight on the fire engine was suddenly swung round towards them and the two boys were picked out in its beam. They waved wildly and a man lifted a megaphone and called to them.

"We can't take you back now, but your people know where you are... Are you all O.K.? Good! They're coming to fetch you 'fore the tide comes up again. We've brought you some grub and two flasks of cocoa... Can you catch? Here they come," and with a mighty heave he flung a loaded haversack across the water to their feet.

When they got back to the fire Dickie took one look at their burden and brightened considerably.

They piled the fire high again, and while they munched and shared the little drinking cups from the tops of the flasks they watched the men at work trying to fill the great breach. Soon more lorries, two bulldozers and a mechanical excavator arrived, but the greatest thrill was the two motor boats which came chugging across the watery levels from the direction of Winchelsea. Food and drink had refreshed the twins, who were very wide

awake, and as their supply of fuel was now getting low, they were all glad to walk about to keep warm. They had no idea of the time, but a suspicion of colour in the eastern sky and the sudden drop in the temperature told David, who seemed to know a lot about weather and the stars, that it was nearly dawn.

"I should think someone would come for us soon," Jon was saying. "I could do with six rashers of bacon and six eggs if we had any bacon and eggs, couldn't you, David?... I say! I think we're going to be rescued... Isn't that Fred Vasson in that motor boat and isn't that your father with him?"

David waved and shouted. "Hello! Is that you, Dad? Here we are all safe and sound."

The motor boat chugged in closer and then they recognized Mr. Morton standing up in the bows.

"Are you all there? Everything all right?"

"Hello, Daddy, darling!" Mary called. "We've had such an adventure. Mackie is here, too."

"I'm sure he is," her father answered, just a trifle grimly the twins thought. "Now pay attention. We can't get the boat any nearer to you because of this track which is higher than we are. I'm coming across for the twins who will come on my back - one at a time, Richard - and then I'll come back for Penny if I can carry her. You boys had better take off your shoes and socks, hang 'em round your necks and wade across... It won't be too deep for you, but you'll have to watch how you step... Hold hard, Vasson. I'm getting out now... keep her close into the bank."

Somehow he managed to scramble on to the track and they saw that the water nearly reached the top of his big rubber boots. There was a deeper pool between the path and the hill and it was some minutes before he found the best way to cross this, but he was over at last and Mary rushed into his arms. When he had disentangled himself he gave the elder boys a curt greeting, a smile to Penny and a pat on the shoulder to Dickie. Then he took Mary on his back, and Dickie handed up a frantic Mackie to his mistress,

who tucked him under one arm and clutched her father's collar with the other.

"I'm going to wade over, too," Penny said suddenly. "I'm nearly as tall as Jon, anyway, and I'm too heavy to carry. Come on, you two."

They reached the boat as Mr. Morton returned with Dickie.

Vasson had not much to say, but when Jon asked, "Is Mother all right? She did get the message that we were here, didn't she?" he nodded and merely said, "Ay, she did. She's all right," and then he moved the tiller and the little boat, very low in the water now, set off in the direction from which it had appeared.

Mr. Morton had some more chocolate and biscuits and another flask with him and insisted that they all have a hot drink and stop asking questions.

"Plenty of time for talk and questions when you've had a spell of bed. That's what you all need and that's what you're going to get just as soon as we can get you there... The car is at the bottom of Winchelsea Hill and I hope we'll be able to get there.

"How far has the sea come in, sir?" Jon asked. "We saw the bank break, you know, and it all came rushing through."

"Almost to Winchelsea. It's got there again after hundreds of years. We shan't get much farther in the boat, but there's a chap with a car just here who will give us a lift and then I suppose someone will take the boat back full of workmen again... They only got the motor boats over from Rye by road about an hour ago... Somewhere just here, wasn't it, Vasson?"

"Yes, sir," said the porter. "Back of this bungalow with a red sundial and the high rockery. We got in from the rockery and I'll tie up here again... Now then, out you get."

They splashed through the puddles in the strange back garden and found a cheerful, bald little man in an old car in the front. The road was covered with water, but it was not very deep and before long they reached the foot

of Winchelsea Hill. Although it was so early and the sun was only just up, there were crowds of people standing about in groups with piles of luggage, and many more coming down the hill to see what had happened. Their driver was paid and thanked and Vasson said:

"If you'll wait here, sir, I'll go and find your car which we parked up the lane somewhere. I'll pick you up here in a few minutes."

While they were waiting for him they strolled up the hill and looked at the amazing scene of the levels covered with water which was shining pink in the sunrise. Under the old cliff where the ground was higher, hundreds of sheep were jostling each other frantically and baaing in panic. But many hundreds of valuable sheep were lost that night.

"I want a bath," Penny said suddenly. "I bet I look a sight."

"You nearly had one," David said, and "You certainly do," Jon added.

Twice on the way home - and Vasson took them by the inland road over the cliffs - Jon tried to tell Mr. Morton the full story. But he could barely keep awake now and the words tumbled into each other.

"Don't worry, old man!" said Mr. Morton. "Plenty of time to hear everything when you've had a bath and a sleep... Nobody is mad with you, but your mother will be glad to see you."

Dickie and Mary were strangely subdued, and once or twice Penny noticed David smile quietly at his father without speaking.

As they ran down into Rye they could trace the river by its darker, muddy track, but all the levels were covered with water now and Camber Castle stood forlorn on a little green island.

Dimly, Jon remembered stepping out of the car in the *Dolphin* yard and noticing a flash of red as Penny pushed him aside and ran over to hug her aunt. There was a lot of confusion and talking; his mother's arm round his shoulders, Mrs. Morton surrounded by twins, but smiling at him over their heads; Penny brushing her hand across her eyes; a steaming hot bath; cool

sheets and a hot-water bottle; drawn curtains with the sun shining through; hot soup and dry toast and then blissful drowsiness through which his mother's voice came soothingly.

"Don't worry, Jon, dear. I'm sure you did well... Grandon has gone for good... he telephoned me last night to say he was never coming back here and that you were all locked in *Beach View*... But we knew that before he rang up, because the lorry-driver back from the beach told the police; and Vasson had already warned them, too, when I told him Grandon hadn't returned from Hastings..." and her hand smoothed his tousled hair just as it had done ten years ago and he slept at last.

12. Thursday: 15-6-10

It was probably because Jon had kept himself awake when they were marooned on the hill at Winchelsea beach that he slept so dreamlessly when his mother left him in bed in the early morning following the great adventure. After she had gone he remembered nothing until his bed began to creak and move as if the house were being shaken by an earthquake.

He grunted, stirred and turned over, but the movement continued, and as there was nothing he hated more than being disturbed when sleeping, he muttered something that sounded like "Gerraway!" and pulled the bed-clothes over his head.

Slowly, his dawning intelligence grasped that a well-known voice was chanting, "WAKE UP, Jonathan!... WAKE UP, Lazybones! Jonathan... WAKE UP!"

He tried in vain to slip back into sleep, but the chanting persisted, so he turned over and groped, as he always did, for his spectacles beside the bed. Even before he had them on he realized that his room was glowing with the gold of the afternoon sun and that something even redder was between the bed and the window.

"Penny," he growled, "why can't you leave me alone? I suppose I've got to lock myself in to be safe from you... You know I'm no good in the morning... Go away!"

"But it isn't morning. It's nearly tea-time, and I've been awake half an hour and nobody seems to be about, so I thought we'd have a talk at once - just us two, Jon, if you see what I mean?"

"I know what you mean when you say just the two of us! Even I can grasp that. But you will come butting in at such stupid times, Penny. I'm still unconscious and I want to go to sleep again."

"Will you be decent if I go and get you a cup of tea?" she asked. "I promise I won't fool about, Jon; but we must make up our minds what we're going to tell the grown-ups, and if we go down Auntie or somebody will grab us and we shan't know what to say."

Jon sat up. She looked very nice and clean and fresh, he thought, and not a bit as if she had spent last night in a gale marooned on the top of a storm-swept hill. Funny how girls managed this sometimes! He ran his fingers through his hair and yawned.

"You all right, Newpenny? Not pneumonia or anything?"

She gave him a relieved and radiant smile. He was going to be decent after all!

"I'm fine, Jon. My poor old bones ache a bit, though. Are you stiff?"

"At the moment my legs are paralysed," he said, "but I expect that's because you're sitting on them... Get off and we'll see if I'm likely to be bedridden."

"We'll pretend you are and I've come to visit you. Poor Jonathan. How awful for you!" and she got off the bed and went over to the window and drew back the curtains. When she spoke again she had her back to him.

"P'raps I was wrong about not telling the grown-ups," she began. "Maybe we wouldn't have got into that mess yesterday if we'd told your mother about what we had found upstairs and all about the clues and everything."

Jon grunted. "Chuck me that pullover. If I've got to sit up and talk I might as well be comfortable... Thanks... Oh! I dunno, Penny. I expect the grown-ups will say we did lots of things wrong, but I don't think not telling them was too awful... It was just that I wasn't sure what was the best thing to do. I never mind doing things, but sometimes it's knowing when to do them that's so difficult."

She was sitting now over by the window with her hands clasped in her lap and looking suspiciously demure.

"Sometimes," she said, "I loathe you, but other times, like now, you're quite nice... Now, let's arrange what to say. I suppose we must tell them everything... Do you realize, Jon, that after all that excitement yesterday we haven't found the treasure and that we forgot all about it?... Let's tell the others all about Miss B. and Slinky - I wonder what's really happened to them? - and then have another meeting and start all over again to find the treasure by ourselves... Do you know, Jon, I'd give anything to find that for your mother... And if those other beasts have run away, and I bet they have, we shall be able to hunt properly without interruptions. I'm sure there must be a treasure or the Ballinger wouldn't have been so keen to get the map and an answer to the clue."

"Go away and leave me in peace," Jon groaned. "You're always worrying me to do something you've thought of... Go and cool your red head somewhere, Penny. Go and hold it in a draught while I dress... When I come down I'll get Mother to ask the Mortons to come and have whatever meal is due next, and then we must tell them all what we know..."

"You said just now it didn't matter about not telling them, Jon! Now we're so near let's go on by ourselves."

"We're not near, you chump! We're no nearer than we were when we got to earthen vessels... Now get out, or I'll throw things at you."

Sadly, Penny departed. Over her shoulder she gave him a soulful and reproachful look and then slipped out hurriedly when he bent under the bed for a slipper.

When Jon came downstairs she was sitting on the arm of one of the big leather chairs in the lounge talking to her aunt. A log was smouldering on the iron dogs and the sun slanted in through the windows, set Penny's red head aflame and then settled in a golden pool on the floor. Jon walked over and kissed his mother, and before he could change his mind, said:

"We've got such a lot to tell you, Mother, but, if you don't mind, the Mortons have been such sports - and I'm sure Mr. Morton will be able to help us now - that I wondered if we could all have tea together in here and

talk it over... Did I dream it or did you tell me that Grandon has gone for good?"

"Yes, he's gone... I expect we've got a lot to tell each other, and Penny wouldn't say a word until you came... I don't mind about the Mortons, Jon, but do you really think they want to be bothered with our business?"

"What's that about the Mortons?" said the cheerful voice of Mr. Morton from the door. "Or is this a family council, Mrs. Warrender?... I couldn't help overhearing what you said just now and I do hope you will let us help you in any way we can. We'd like to feel we're friends now besides being the *Dolphin's* first guests."

And so it was arranged, for it was difficult to reject such friendliness; and Vasson wheeled in two big trolleys piled with toast and tea and jam and crumpets and cakes. The twins, with flushed and smiling faces and neatly parted hair, and David still smothering a yawn, came in with their mother and they all sat round the fire. Just before they started Jon whispered to David that he was going to tell the grown-ups everything.

David nodded. "You know best. It's your show, anyway, and not ours... I've just had a letter I want to show you as soon as I can."

When the trolleys had been pushed aside, Jon told the story from the beginning. Once, when he got to the secret passage, his mother interrupted, and twice Penny helped him, but he told everything that had happened to them clearly and well.

"And so, you see, sir," Jon finished, turning to Mr. Morton, "that although we are sure that they stole the actual clue we are just as certain that they never got as far as 'earthen vessels'. "

"The solving of that clue was very clever work," Mr. Morton replied. "You were smarter than they were. Can you remember what the parchment was like, Jon? I mean, how big was it?"

Jon frowned. "Oh, quite small really. Only a few inches wide, and the writing was very spidery and old-fashioned, but it was clear enough. If

you'll lend me a pencil, sir, I'll try and draw it."

When he had passed it over, Mr. Morton looked at Mrs. Warrender.

"I believe these children are really on the track of something," he said, "but do please say if you'd rather we didn't investigate this any further. It is, after all, entirely your business, and I wouldn't have you think..."

But Mrs. Warrender made it clear that she would be grateful for any help he could give them. So Jon fetched the map, which he spread out on the floor so that they could all see it.

They all examined it again for a long time until finally Mr. Morton got up from his knees and lit his pipe.

"There are too many coincidences," he said at last, "for this to be a fake, and I really do believe there is treasure hidden round here somewhere. Jon may be right in this theory about it being hidden in an old Roman vase. A smuggler on the Marsh is likely to have unearthed Roman remains, and I dare say you all noticed that the map showed a route across the Marsh to this place - and I think they must mean the *Dolphin*, because it's specially emphasised on the map."

"We're sure this is a smugglers' inn, Mr. Morton," Penny broke in excitedly. "And when you see our room upstairs and the passage you'll be sure, too... We think smugglers hid from the King's men in our room."

Mr. Morton drew at his pipe and picked up the map again.

"And there seems to be a link between the *Dolphin* and Camber, and then the track goes on to the hill on which you sheltered last night and then goes on a little way further towards Cliff End. I believe there was once an old inn on the edge of the beach there, but it was destroyed by the sea some time ago. Anyway, if it wasn't destroyed then, it will have gone last night. We'll ask Vasson, but I think I read somewhere that it was once used by smugglers... I believe there's an extra clue somewhere that you haven't yet found. Do you remember, Jonathan, if the parchment looked as if it had been torn or cut?"

Jon shook his head. "I can't remember. I don't think so... but I tell you what, sir, I believe the message was written at the bottom of the piece of paper."

"I was thinking that perhaps you'd only got hold of half the message... Does Mrs. Warrender mind if we explore the secret passage now? I think we ought to do that at once. I must admit that I'm as excited as any of you."

Mrs. Warrender smiled. "I don't mind. I haven't seen it yet, you know. Let's go at once. Shall we want candles and torches, Penny?"

"What I want to know," Dickie said loudly, "is what's happened to the storm and the sea? Will someone tell me if we are utterly surrounded with water in this place and if the sea is still coming through that hole and if they've been able to stop it and if *Beach View* is still burning and whether Slinky has been caught and..."

Penny grabbed the twins, took them into a corner and told them what she knew and that Vasson had already said that the wind had dropped and that the gap in the bank was being filled.

"We're meeting in your secret room in five minutes," David called, and Penny then excused herself and ran up to her bedroom for a jersey.

There she leaned from her window and sniffed at the breeze coming in from the sea. The storm had long since blown itself out and the sky above the chimney-pots was a delicate egg-shell blue, across which a few white,

woolly clouds sailed serenely. For some reason she could not explain, Penny felt disappointed and rather sad. She had expected to do so much for her aunt, and although they had certainly all had an amazing adventure, she had really done very little. It was nice of Mr. Morton to be so friendly and helpful, but she did wonder whether he was only pretending that there might be a treasure so that they should not be disappointed.

She glanced round into the little walled garden now glowing in the evening sunshine and noticed at once that the old wall through which the withy tree had been growing had collapsed in the storm and lay now across the flowerbed in a pile of dusty rubble; and the tree, round which some kindly mason, many years ago, had built the wall, now lay amongst the ruins.

Penny ran down the little stairs to the main corridor, hoping that she would find Jon before the others came. She leaned over the banisters and saw her cousin rather moodily kicking the smouldering logs in the lounge fire.

"Oy!" she called vulgarly. "Where are the others?"

Jon looked up. "I think they're all changing into clothes suitable for exploration! What do you want?"

"I've got something to tell you."

He strolled up and they sat together on the top stair.

"What's up, Penny? You look glum... I feel a bit flat too... Everything seems to have fizzled out, doesn't it?"

Penny was rather surprised that he felt the same, but she told him quickly of the fallen wall and what it might mean.

"Don't you see, Jon, that the passage may have been filled up? We'd better be ready for it. What do you think Mr. Morton is going to discover? I don't really want him to find anything, Jon. I want *us* to find it."

But before he could answer the others arrived and they all trooped upstairs together.

Jon unlocked the door of their room and stood aside for the grown-ups to enter first. Then the twins showed their father the diamond-scratched window-pane and would have opened the panel immediately if David had not pulled them back.

"Would you like to see the other papers now, sir?" Jon said. "Or shall we do the passage first?"

"I want to see the passage," Mr. Morton replied. "Nothing else really interests me because I've never been in a secret passage before! We've all got torches... May I suggest that Jon and Penny should lead and Mrs. Warrender go next because, after all, the *Dolphin* is hers. The Morton parents will guard the rear and the twins and David look after the centre. Agreed?"

The twins looked as if they wished to disagree very strongly, but an ugly look from David and a nudge from their mother silenced them just as Penny went down on her knees before the panel and cried:

"The trap threads! I'd forgotten them, Jon. I set these yesterday morning just to see if Slinky came up here... This one hasn't been broken, but I forgot to look at the other one on the landing although, of course, we shall all have broken it coming in."

So with Jon and Penny in the lead, and Mrs. Warrender close behind, they stepped into the passage. Their torches gave plenty of light and Jon led them down easily and quickly past the entrance to Slinky's room, where he had to admit that they had not yet discovered a way of opening the panel from this side.

"Are you going to take us as far as the passage goes, Jon?" Mr. Morton called, "or shall we search the walls and steps for a hiding-place as we go?"

"Let's do the passage first," Penny pleaded. "You'll all be very surprised to know where this comes out. When we've got to the end perhaps Mr. Morton will have an idea about the best way to search for some earthen vessels."

This was agreed, and Jon continued down and then into Trader's Passage proper. Penny had turned to explain to her aunt that they were now underneath the steps by the side of the *Dolphin* which led down to the river, when Jon stopped suddenly and she bumped into him.

"You clumsy idiot..." she began, and then saw where his torch was pointing.

"You were right about the roots of the tree, Penny," he was saying. "Look. Shine your torch. Half the roof and the side of the wall is down... Just a sec... There's something odd here... Come here, Newpenny."

Penny caught the excitement in his voice and squeezed up beside him. The twins in the rear set up a querulous duet that "they couldn't get on", but she heard none of this, for she was staring at the spot of light from Jon's torch which was focused on a pile of fallen earth and rubbish almost at his feet.

And so Penny found the treasure after all and Jon stepped quietly back so that the honour should be hers. In the dust of broken masonry and mortar something gleamed and sparkled in the light of the torch and she bent slowly and picked up a string of shimmering diamonds that trickled like fire through her trembling fingers.

The others pressed forward, but Penny was thinking only of her aunt and she turned and flung her arms round her.

"I've found it for you, darling. I wanted it as a surprise for you and we've got it after all... It's the *Dolphin's* treasure and it belongs to you and we've beaten the Ballingers in the end."

Mrs. Warrender's voice was rather shaky when she managed to disengage herself, and then pandemonium broke out as the others tried to see what was happening. Eventually, Mr. Morton restored order.

"We'd better see if the diamonds are real before we celebrate," he said. "Shall we go back upstairs to the light and see?"

"I'd like you to see where Penny found them first, sir, if you don't mind," Jon said. "The others might go up with Mother and we'll join them in a

minute."

So while Penny led the way upstairs again, Mr. Morton went back to the broken wall with Jon, who went down on his knees in the rubble.

"Look, sir! Don't you think these bits of clay are the remains of an old vase? I think the necklace was in the vase which must have fallen from somewhere and broken."

"I think you're right, Jon. Let's pick up all the pieces and examine them in the light." But before they went up after the others they found a niche which had been hollowed out of the earth wall behind the roots of the withy tree. It was obvious that as the wall had crashed in the gale it had brought down the old tree and part of the roof and side of the passage with it. It seemed as if the roots had hidden the cavity holding the clay vase, but Jon had to admit that they had never really searched there and it might have been possible to have found it if they had known where to look.

When they joined the others, Mrs. Warrender was putting a match to the dry sticks in the fireplace and Mrs. Morton was fixing the diamonds round Penny's neck.

"Penny says you won't mind if we all stay up here and talk, Jon?" his mother said from her knees. "She says you can show us all the papers now... Have you found any more treasure? I don't think I could bear it if you have."

Mr. Morton laughed and shook his head as he emptied the pieces of broken clay from his handkerchief on to the table. And then Penny, with the diamonds blazing round her neck, dashed over to Jon, who was closing the panel.

"You really found the treasure, Jon. You stood out of the way and let me pick them up and then I got so excited I boasted a bit as if I'd found them and it's you as much as me and I'm going to tell everybody..."

"Don't be a silly little girl," was all he said as he gave her a push back towards the centre of the room.

Next they showed Mrs. Warrender and the Mortons the other papers and Uncle Charles' letter, and it was while his mother was reading this that Jon turned to Mr. Morton.

"But the clue isn't fair, sir," he said. "That earthen vessel we found might have been hidden anywhere within a hundred miles. How could the holder of the clue possibly know where to look?"

"I told you before that I believe you've only got half the clue. Where did you find it?"

"In the Bible. Pinned to the letter Mother is reading now. The letter written to me by Great-Uncle Charles."

"Then let's look in the Bible again. Mary, my lass, bring it over to the window if you can lift it!... And may I look at the letter or is it too private?"

Mrs. Warrender came over with the letter in her hand.

"I heard what you were saying, Mr. Morton. Jon, did you realize that old Uncle Charles says that clues, not a clue, were attached to his letter? Are you sure there was only one piece of paper?"

Jon was sure of that and then Mary took the big Bible by the edges of the two covers, turned it upside down and with great difficulty shook the pages. Several things fell out - a pressed flower, an old envelope which contained a baby's curl of hair and a small piece of parchment.

"Got it!" Jon said triumphantly as he pounced on the latter. "Well done, Mother and Mr. Morton.

"Penny! David!" Jon called. "Look what we've found. I bet this paper would fit the one the others took."

The message on the parchment was very brief:

Jon polished his glasses.

"Gosh," he said. "What does this mean? The other, which I s'pose was written above this before it was torn, said 'nt 8 April 7."

"And it was the 'nt' which set us off on the right track," Penny said. "It's only because we guessed 'nt' meant New Testament. Try it again, Jon! It might work. Find the fifteenth book of the New Testament."

Jon took the great book on his knee and turned the pages.

"Timothy I," he said after a lot of turning of pages and counting... "Now Chapter 6... I see what you mean. I've got it... I've got it! This must be it. Verse 10 starts: '*For the love of money is the root of all evil.*'... *Root* is the clue, I suppose? Don't you think so, sir?"

Mr. Morton laughed. "Very ingenious! I suppose everyone who used the *Dolphin* much would know the withy tree, and all the smugglers who used the secret passage would know about the roots, of course. *Earthen vessels*... and then *the root of all evil* is possible."

Mrs. Warrender laughed shakily and held up the diamonds which Penny had just handed to her to the fading light from the window.

"If these are real, and I think they are," she said, "I'm going to see that the money is properly used and not the root of all evil...! This means lots of extra things for the *Dolphin* and the most important things for Jon and

Penny, too..." but Penny saw tears in her eyes and changed the subject quickly by asking about Miss Ballinger and Slinky.

Mr. Morton explained as well as he could what the police had told them this morning.

"As far as we could make out from the detective who came over from Hastings..."

"A real detective?" Dickie interrupted. "A real detective came and you let us stay in bed?"

Mr. Morton ignored the interruption.

"It seems that Miss Ballinger has been watched for some time, because she appears to have had some dubious dealings with antiques and pictures. They had not anything definite against her, but there is no doubt that she was a suspicious character. Grandon was her assistant and accomplice, and between them they must have heard of this treasure. It may be that Grandon came to the *Dolphin* - and we haven't found out just exactly when he did come to old Mr. Charles - in order to discover if there really was a treasure. Anyway, the police believe that Miss Ballinger forged the letter recommending Mrs. Warrender to keep Slinky, as you call him so aptly, on at the *Dolphin*. How and when the passage was discovered we don't know, but almost certainly through the entrance into Grandon's room, and this was very lucky for him... But, of course, Ballinger was the brains and the police are very keen to find her and her pretty niece as soon as possible."

"Have they got anything against that girl?" Jon asked.

"We didn't ask and we don't know whether she really is a niece or just an accomplice."

David replied: "Whatever she may have done wrong she did come back after Ballinger had locked us in. She smashed the window and threw in the key of the front room where the twins were, and I'm sure she was against leaving us there, anyway, and that's something in her favour."

"I still don't know everything you've been doing these last few days," Mrs. Warrender said to her two, "but I s'pose you will tell the old people some time, won't you? Meanwhile, I think Mrs. Morton will agree that it should be early bed for everybody tonight."

"But we've only just got up," Dickie protested.

"Might as well have stayed in our pyjamas," Mary added.

"I'm not going to bed *again*," said Penny, and, "You don't really mean that, do you, Mother?" Jon asked.

"Anyway, I'm hungry," Dickie went on, "and it's bad to go to bed on an empty stummick."

But it was David, the only one to remain silent, who had the bright idea.

"It's rather a special occasion," he pleaded, "and I don't think any of us could sleep - not even the twins - if we did go to bed. I'm going to ask Dad to help us finish off the day in style and drive us down to the beach so that we can watch them mending the bank and climb up our hill again... It's not cold and the moon will be up later and I don't suppose any of us will ever see such a sight again."

Protests from Mrs. Morton and Mrs. Warrender were swept aside in the enthusiasm which followed this argument, and the twins dashed down for coats and rugs. Mrs. Warrender produced two thermos flasks and filled bags with cake and then stood under the archway with Mrs. Morton to see them off.

Penny sat in front with Mary and Mr. Morton and watched the sun sink down behind Winchelsea Hill as the car splashed along the straight road that crossed the levels. To their left the grass was still covered with water, and Camber Castle was surrounded by the widest moat its walls had ever seen. On the other side the Marsh was higher, and although in some places the dikes had overflowed, the flooding was not so severe. In a few places the roadway was under a few inches of water and everywhere else the surface was treacherous with slime and mud, but they ran along steadily

enough until they turned into the narrower road leading to the beach. In many places here the road was completely under water still and there had been so much heavy traffic on it that the surface was badly broken up.

"Lucky we had the sense to bring rubber boots," Jon said from the back. "We'll have to walk soon," and in another few minutes Mr. Morton turned the car off the flooded road into the garage entrance of a deserted bungalow.

"Wouldn't like to go back now, I suppose?" he said as he opened the door. "It's not going to be an easy walk!"

This remark was greeted with howls of derision, and so they splashed along the track which led directly to the beach until they were stopped by a large policeman.

Mr. Morton explained about the children's special connection with the incident and the policeman let them pass.

The track which they knew so well was now a mass of churned-up mud and shingle. In some places bundles of faggots had been laid down in an attempt to make a surface fit for traffic, but so much of it had slipped down into the water that the lorries would never be able to get back until the floods had subsided. They scrambled along the top of the shingle bank on the right of the track until they reached their hill and climbed up to the old hut. From here they could see an army of men filling the great gap. A huge mechanical excavator was at work and fire engines were pumping water from the pits which the incoming sea had torn in the soft earth. As the light faded the strange scene was lit by searchlights from the fire engines, and even on the bank, fires made by the workmen, flickered weirdly in the dusk.

"I want to see that digger machine working," Dickie said. "Will you take me, Dad? Or shall we have the cake first?"

"I'll come, too," Mary said. "An' I can't see why we can't eat cake as we go."

The others watched them go down the hill, pick their way through some pools and climb the great bank.

"Funny," said David, "but we've hardly had a chance to say a word to each other since last night - or this morning, wasn't it?... I never told you, Penny, how glad I was you found the treasure after all... But last night was the best, wasn't it? .. I've got a letter I want to talk to you about."

Jon and Penny were leaning against the hut looking out over the burned-out ruin of *Beach View* to the sea. It was a good idea to have come back here, because it was always fun to live an adventure over again in the same place, and they were both thinking that nothing that could ever happen to them would be as exciting as the adventure of the *Gay Dolphin's* treasure. Jon was thinking, although he did not say so, how plucky Penny must have been with the twins in that locked room in the dark and how splendid it had been of her not to write the note to him. And Penny was thinking - and she was too shy to say so - how calm and steady Jon had been when he rescued them and how certain she had been that he would come in the end just because he had never let her down. And so although they both liked David very much, they were not really listening to what he was saying, but just enjoying their thoughts and each other's company as good friends always can.

"Wake up, you two. I want to tell you about this letter I've had from Peter."

Penny grinned and stretched her arms over her head. "Sorry! I was dreaming. Tell us about Peter."

David took a crumpled letter from his pocket.

"I think I told you that we've a secret club," he began. "We started it up at Witchend in Shropshire, and it was really Peter's idea."

"Who's in it?" Penny asked.

"Peter and the twins and me, of course, and a grand chap called Tom Ingles and a girl called Jenny. I think I told you that Peter couldn't come to the *Dolphin* with us this time, but I wrote and told her a bit about you both and how we were going to help you find the treasure. Of course, she doesn't know what a marvellous adventure we have had, but in the letter I had from her this morning she says that if I agree we'd like you to be members of the

Lone Pine Club as well... Here... I'll read it to you. Got a torch, Jon? Thanks. Here it is...

"'You don't know how sick I am at missing a hunt for treasure and you must write and tell me everything that happens. I met Tom yesterday in Onnybrook and told him about you, and he said it was just like the pictures, but he always says that. We think you had better ask Jon and Penny if they would like to be members, too, because they sound fun. It's no good them joining if we can't all meet, and perhaps they could come up here somewhere next hols. Ask them, David, and report back, and give my love to the twins. I do wish I could have come, but I know I was right to stay with Daddy...'"

David stuffed the letter back in his pocket and switched off the torch.

"That's about all," he said. "Will you? I'd like you to." Penny squeezed Jon's arm. "I'd love it," she said, "and thank you for asking us."

"Of course we will," Jon said. "Grand! And that's a good idea about next hols."

Before David could answer, there came from below them the mournful whistle of a peewit. "Peeee-wit. Peeee-wit!"

"What's that?" Penny asked.

"I'll teach you that," David laughed. "That's the signal of the Lone Piners... Here we are, Dickie. We'll flash the torch."

In a few minutes the twins came toiling up the hill. "Daddy can't make it," Mary panted. "He's miles behind."

Dickie flung himself down beside her. "Do you know what that man in the big shovel thing said to me? He said if I didn't clear out of the way he'd drive the beastly thing at me and dump me in the sea... I wondered whether I'd let him."

He turned round and faced the sea and for a minute they all waited for Mr. Morton and watched the line of the sea, the flooded levels and the light of Dungeness winking its warning and an answer to the faint flash of distant Gris Nez on the coast of France.

"It's most peculiar." Dickie went on. "But it's Thursday still and we only came on Monday. Things do happen to us. I wonder what we shall do tomorrow?"